

Interview: Poet Susan Wheeler of New York City and Princeton University

*...Just this transpired. Against a tree I swooned and fell, and
water seeped into my shoe, and a dream began to grow in me.*

*Or despair, and so I chose the dream. And while I slept,
I was being fed, and clothed, addressed — as though awake
with every faculty, and so it went. Then: blaze, blare of sun
after years uncounted, and synesthesia of it and sound,
the junco's chirp and then the jay's torn caw...*

Susan Wheeler interview-article by Peter Menkin



Poet Susan Wheeler by Frank Wojciechowsk

INTRODUCTION

Poet Susan Wheeler's interview is another in an ongoing series with Anglican and Christian poets. Professor Wheeler is Director of Princeton University's Creative Writing Department (Lewis Center for the Arts) in New Jersey. In our initial telephone conversation in the latter part of July, 2012 she said to me: *I think that my own religious belief and spiritual life informs my writing. Long before I was using overt references I had the experience of going to a small Baptist college in PA and speaking to a class with one of my books [in hand]. The students in the class immediately spoke of my personal relationship with Jesus. I was found out. I had a personal relationship with Jesus, and [it was] sort of thrilling. After that I became overt in my references. Assorted poems is selected works. Ledger is about faith and stewardship.*

I think, too in that same phone call early on, she made this interesting remark on The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. He is an influence on her poetry work:

For her book *Ledger*, the writing of Rowan Williams was very important. The third to last in *Assorted Poems* is called the "Debtor in the Convex Mirror." It is originally, an iconic, contemporary poem written 30 years ago, by John Ashbury. Relativism was dominant, then and was assumed [as the usual thing]. What I wanted to do was talk about that idea of how there could be something as absolute as God if everything is as Rowan Williams made as a model: That our consciousness does not overlap with another person... There are certain shared experiences... it is in those shared experiences that God exists.

The reader realizes soon in a conversation with the poet that as a Christian and Anglican, that she is a thoughtful woman of letters. Her work is neither shallow, nor thrown about, but well considered and in the modern sense engaging in its taste for language that has an American jazz sound. For Susan Wheeler likes to work with the sound of words. She says in this interview, made with her by phone with this Religion Writer where she was situated on the phone line at her home near Princeton University:

There is a strong drive in me for a counterpoint... I do try to go back and forth and vary a great deal.

Her Church, where she attends, she says in that same initial phone conversation: The one I try to go to most recently: St. Luke's on the Field in Manhattan. On Hudson, West Village. Professor Wheeler, speaking of her Baptism, says she was, Dunked in 1987.

Please note there are a few adult words in the poetry represented in this article-interview.

In one of the few other interviews with the poet, this in [Bomb magazine](#), (2005) reads as Robert Polito asked: **A canny, plangent, demotic and visionary anatomy of "Money and God," as one of her titles here tags it, *Ledger* might well be Susan's finest book of poems. The brio, elegance, and wit of her new work make other much recent writing sound clumsy and tone deaf; and her adventurousness, audacity, even her defiance, make many of her contemporaries appear slight, or trivial. *Record Palace* also focuses on money—on class and race, too, as well as on jazz, art and the city of Chicago. Cindy, a white, "edgy" art history graduate student from Thousand Oaks, California, starts to hang at a record store—all jazz, all clutter—presided over by the astonishing Acie. Susan apostrophized Acie in a sonnet she placed in *Source Codes*:**

You've been pure trouble since I thought you up,
Acie: hairnet, glass eye, a wormy dick
through stretch pants across a girth so thick
even your dog don't jump. I dared you drop
onto pages without a plot—and make for one.
Your diffidence don't stack up to jack
shit so far, you mangy crank, your bun-
ions in the split of your flip flop's sock.
I need your help here . . .

She says further in that same Bomb magazine interview: *The God part was always there, just not as overt. It was after my second book, I think, that I did a reading at a religious school in Pennsylvania,*

*Messiah College, and there the students just launched in, talking about Jesus and how several poems either supported or took issue with their own beliefs. It was spooky but great—I felt like my secret was out! I've always wished I could write something in which faith was as apparent and as organic as it is, say, in Agee's *Death in the Family*, but for one reason or another I didn't. I knew I wanted this book to be about money, and then it seemed inevitable that it be about God, too. That so much of the yearning is displaced yearning for God.*

Another noteworthy man says of poet and Princeton University Professor Susan Wheeler: About her work, **John Ashbery** writes, “**Susan Wheeler’s narrative glamour finds occasions in unlikely places: hardware stores, Herodotus, Hollywood Squares, Flemish paintings, green stamps, and echoes of archaic and cyber speech. What at first seems cacophonous comes in the end to seem invested with a mournful dignity.**”

From a published listing about the poet, this information: Wheeler’s awards include the Witter Bynner Prize for Poetry from the American Academy of Arts & Letters, and fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

Wheeler has taught at the University of Iowa, NYU, Rutgers, and Columbia University, and is currently on the creative writing faculty at Princeton University. She has lived in the New York area for twenty years.

Additional information about the poet:

Poetry

Bag ‘o’ Diamonds (University of Georgia Press, 1993)

Smokes (Four Way Books, 1998)

Source Codes (Salt, 2001)

Ledger (Iowa, 2005)

Assorted Poems (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009)

Prose

Record Palace (Graywolf, 2005)

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/1109>

<http://www.dailyiowan.com/2012/01/26/Arts/26680.html>

<http://news.uchicago.edu/multimedia/poetry-reading-susan-wheeler>

<http://us.macmillan.com/assortedpoems/SusanWheeler>

INTERVIEW WITH POET SUSAN WHEELER

1 I found Robert Polito’s question in the 2005 interview published in *Bomb* magazine very good, and so we start with his question from that interview. His is a question that gets right to poetry and in this case the prose of your novel...:

RP: *Record Palace* re-creates Chicago so beautifully. Also jazz. Music is crucial to all your characters—your displaced art history student Cindy; record store owner Acie; and Acie’s son Bowtie. Is jazz—is music of any kind—also just as important for you?

Music is, and it was especially so for my novel since it was, in large part, about jazz. In my poetry, the sound is very important. I do borrow from other art forms. I’m most aware of it with visual art in, for example, thinking about the surface of a poem, as one might think about the surface of a painting. There is a strong drive in me for a counterpoint... I do try to modulate, to go back and forth and to vary a great deal.

As a poem that is directly involved with music, there is the poem, “Benny the Beaver: My Father’s Tale,” that’s simply a recounting of a record that I had as a child of a story with jazz music in the background. That’s in *Assorted Poems*.

Benny’s tail would only drum.
All day while fellow beavers drug

The tree limbs to the riverbank
Benny slapped his tail to bang

A beat on hollow logs,
Keen for external analogs

To the hums within his head.

(from "Benny the Beaver: My Father's Tale")

2 Of your works of poetry in published books, which of them do you as poet suggest a reader buy and read first? Or borrow from their local library? In this question, please give some sense in that work that will appeal to the Church going Christian, or even the poetry reader who is seeking a look at our modern world in the 21st Century through your special prism of voice. Especially, as this seeker may be trying to make sense of the kind of existential way that has been called Post Christian in today's America. Will you allow us to excerpt a short example in your explanation of one of two of the poetry works in your suggested title that you respond about?

Probably the best sampler of the work, since it includes all of my books, except the forthcoming book, *Meme* (in October), is *Assorted Poems*. The notion of faith or Christian faith, specifically, comes in throughout the books, but most explicitly in the individual collection, *Ledger*. If someone wanted an essential focus on faith, one might go to *Ledger*.

First of all I'm Episcopalian, which gives one a lot of room within the relationship to God... It is a *living* relationship, not a static one, and accommodates doubt. There is a poem from *Smokes* (also in *Assorted Poems*) called "The Dogwood and the The" which I wrote at a time I was living in Virginia and going to a more evangelical Episcopal Church than I was used to, early on in my life as an Episcopalian. I was having a great deal of trouble with what one of my priests called the "particularity of Christ." The poem draws upon that, not in a direct or overt way, but does struggle with that. What was the Passion, how can I get my head around a God that became incarnate, in Christ.



Poet as child.

It wasn't that the process was rational, and I still don't think I could articulate my faith in a rational way. That is why I am an Anglican; I can hold various contradictory ideas at the same time and not feel the need to sort them out. But because my faith had always been more nebulously based; in order to say the Nicene Creed, I needed to be able to say it without making the incarnation only symbolic or a "story." I wanted to meet the liturgy on its own terms. Again, *Assorted Poems* has a sampling of my work to date. *Ledger* was a thematic book of poems looking at the measure of faith, and resources, and stewardship. There is a long history of earlier poets using the trope or metaphor of money in devotional poetry. Herbert wrote a number of poems that used various financial vocabularies to talk directly to his God. I also wanted to explore the idea – the book was written before the crash in 2008 — that all of the culture's consumption had something to do with the absence of a relationship with God, a yearning for transcendence. The rampant faith that money would provide all that religious belief traditionally had provided, I just saw as corrosive. The collection *Ledger* revolves around that idea, in part.

3 Allow me to put you on the spot for a moment, and here I don't ask for a defensive response so much as an introduction to the kind of voice and form in your poetry of unusual ear. This quote is from a comment on Amazon.com of your book, *Assorted Poems*. Comment by S. Stansel:

Susan Wheeler deserves to be much more widely known. She is in the very top tier of poets writing today and Assorted Poems is an excellent introduction to the breadth of her work. I can't recommend this book highly enough. If you only buy one book of poetry this year make it Assorted Poems.

With it is this less favorable, even critical comment that in its way dismisses your work.

Comment by [Simon G. Barrett](#):

In the very first (and title) poem of Wheeler's first collection, Bag 'o' Diamonds ('o'?), we read

Oh ye who considereth the faith

When I last looked into the King James Bible, ye was plural; the -eth form takes thou, though in this form (you who-) the ending would properly be -est.

- or is this Pythonesque gibberish deliberate?

NB the 'O' in Prince's 1987 Sign 'O' the Times album is an attempt to represent the peace (or anti-nuke) symbol (hence the quotation marks) not a new form of punctuation. More important, should we care? Chock full o'Nuts, more like.

(1) For the Bible student who probably attends a Bible Study, give us the opportunity to better understand what your poetic statement about considering the faith in the King James Bible is about;

(2) I think this man's comment (Simon G. Barrett), represents well some of the confusion that faces many readers of your various works. Do you think this is so, and will you comment telling the reader why this may be?

I'll go back to that first poem in my first book, *Bag 'o' Diamonds* (the poem is also in the sampler book, *Assorted Poems*), that the fellow is taking issue with. And the title may have very well failed for half my readership — clearly it failed for this fellow! What I have always been interested in is American vernacular speech, and I wanted to signal that right off the bat. I

wanted to connote the vernacular signage in diners where the menu item is written “full ‘o’ nuts” or “frank ‘n beans,” for example, where the apostrophes bear no relation to the missing letters. It was the same interest in the vernacular of “O ye who considereth the faith,” a voice that would try to approximate elevated, Biblical language.

In this instance, in this particular poem, I wanted to dispense with the childhood sort of history in the first poem. A poet’s first book is often very personal: their growing up, their childhood. I wanted to communicate a sense of alienation and a sense of being judged, and a kind of yearning for something else. In the last two lines: **O ye who considereth the faith, can ye slam the wong straight.** “Slam the wong,” of course, is another nod to a vernacular, and an off-color vernacular, speech, being a way of saying masturbate.

My first friend had just died of AIDs in the 80s at a time of great judgment against gay culture, where many conservatives were saying they were bringing God’s wrath on themselves. The American vernacular of these lines, you masturbate yourself into being straight, is used bitterly, sadly. It was a piece of what I was wrestling with – how the religious right could skew religious faith so, as this judgment was not part of the religion I had been dunked into. I definitely think readers face confusion in my poems. I do not generally write a clear story in my poems. I am very interested in language working in the moment. I may have a wistful kind of statement and then contradict that with a smartass remark. Poetry has a long history of working in many different ways, but in the last 50-years of mainstream poetry it has not been so. We expect a poem to be a tiny story with short lines. I think about poems as having so much more possibility; sometimes they can be tiny stories with short lines. They can sometimes be essays, they can sometimes be theatre. All of these dimensions of poetry that go back to the ancients are seen as retrograde. We expect poems to give us a “take-away.”



Poet Susan Wheeler as little girl. This, too, from Poet’s private collection. Photo titled, “Child

Two," by G.L. Skeen.

A lot of that has to be with how we're taught to read poems. What is the symbolism, what is the message of the poem? Language as a medium, like paint or music, has an enormous range and potential that is not explored by a one line take-away. But language has an advantage on paint or music in that it is intrinsically representational. If we hear the word **cat**, we have a relationship with it. We cannot think of **cat** abstractly. I am interested in evoking emotions, feelings, and am occasionally interested in a story — however, I want to do that not through a single occasion for a poem but through the possibilities that open up while writing the poem.

4 In your work as a teacher with students who are poets at Princeton University, where you are Director of the Creative Writing Program, talk to us some about your formal work in the classroom. By this I mean, tell us how you approach the student poet, and what areas of the craft as it appeals to students in recent semesters do you want to hear about? Are there any specific questions or comments made in either the classroom or in your work as Director of Creative Writing you'd like to relay to us in some form?

In terms of how do I approach a student poet, we are strictly an undergraduate program at Princeton. Many of our students are reading and writing poetry for the first time. Some students come in having read only Shel Silverstein, and they want to write rhyming and funny poems. The students are anywhere from 18 to 22. I teach at all levels of undergraduate.

So my main goal is for them to get a sense of the variety of things they can do with a poem. So I give them a lot of different kinds of exercises. I have them read a number of different kinds of poetry from traditional to experimental. So they get an idea of the range of possibilities. As they develop, I try to look at their poems and encourage them to look at the poem at hand on an individual basis. And try to see what the student poem is trying to do, and improve on it on its own terms. So it is a very individual pedagogy in that respect.

What I generally start beginners in, and I don't give them long to do it, 24 hours...they are to write a limerick. That is a good exercise to start with. There are certain parameters to a limerick that involve sound, tone, sense. They are off color. They are short. There is a particular meter, a cadence to every line. The students bring in their limericks to discuss with the group on the first day, and many have never been in a group critique. It is a good exercise to begin a discussion of poems, since the parameters are so clear and probably won't be so straightforward throughout the rest of the semester. Even though we may be writing strict forms with other exercises, we probably won't be able to agree what makes a poem in the future that works or doesn't work. It gives students a firm ground before we step off the grid.

By Weldon Kees, midcentury poet:

There was a French writer named Sartre
Who got off to a pretty good start?
But as year followed year
It got painfully clear
He was longer on wind than on artery.

5 I know we're coming to the end of our interview. Thank you so much for your time and willingness to tell readers of your work as teacher and poet. But we've not touched

specifically on your life of Church attendance, and matters of faith as they've influenced your vision and voice as poet. This broad question leaves more than one door open to you, and in its non-directive way provides an opportunity for you to explore with us some of the influence and inspiration of faith in your own life, mostly as it relates to your writing.

I was raised by two Unitarians who adamantly did not believe in God, and frequently made fun of religious people, but I was fascinated by my friends who were Catholic. My first poems when I was six or seven were prayers. I wanted to imitate my Catholic friends' prayers.



Book of Poetry by Susan Wheeler; recent collection.

It took many, many years before I became observant in any formal way. I was living in Greenwich Village in the 80s, and I went to a memorial service at an Episcopal church in the heart of the West Village for someone who died of AIDs. And that did it. This was for me. I then got dunked, but it was a provisional baptism because my mother insisted that the Unitarian Minister who had christened me would not have mentioned God. That's my own history with it. My own kind of seeking has been there in the poems, in one way or another.

Most definitely, certain poems in their writing do feel as though they come *through* rather than *from* me, even though I was cautioned by a priest early on that feelings are not faith! It may just be a feeling that I'm having a good day. But yes, I have had the sense, like other poets, that a poem is being talked through us. It is a rare occasion. I definitely think that there is so much open possibility in a poem that there is a lot of room for things that aren't, can't be, directly and rationally expressed.

6 In this the last question of our conversation today, this Religion Writer has probably forgotten a question or comment that is on your mind or that you've now thought of that you'd like to talk to readers about. Please take some time now, even to mention your current work or an upcoming work. Or where someone may come see you give a reading. The venue need not be accessible to the local or immediate reader to where this interview is posted.

In October my next book, *Meme*, is being published by the University of Iowa Press. Also the UK edition of what is essentially my “selected poems,” *Assorted Poems*, is being published by Salt Publishing. My web page is www.susanwheeler.net . If readers want to write Susan Wheeler: swheeler@princeton.edu

I will be reading from both books throughout the next year in the U.K. as well as in New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Boston; the first reading this fall will be at Labyrinth Books in Princeton, NJ on September 27 with poets James Richardson and Tracy K. Smith. All the readings can be found on my web page or by subscribing to my Facebook page. (In the past I’ve read at Harvard, the Hammer Museum at UCLA, The Poetry Project in New York, the 92nd Street Y, for some examples). At most readings, I read between 15 and 30 minutes, depending on whether I am reading alone or with others, and question-and-answer periods and book-signings follow.

ADDENDUM

What I Thought It Would Be Like

after James Wright’s “Living by the Red River”

Blood flows in me, but what does it have to do
with the rain that is falling?
Believing a wiggly army, English teachers
or preachers or adults who (for the smarmiest reasons)
leaned in to listen over holy knitting then,
blood flows in me, but what kind of relation
makes the table when the child falls on the
lawnmower, on this oh deceptive summer day?
Does it have to do with the elephant’s duress
caught red-handed in the butter on his way to the
dryer? Hardly a day passes when you don’t say now,
“You too,” before the errands come.

Rain that is falling is less than blood, is less
than a storm on the surface of the water, is less
than the level of hot sauce in this jar, is less
than a cataclysmic sentencing, is less than the
view of trees over the accountant’s brow, is less than
the semblance of fortune this rhetoric ringing,
ringing you, predating, preying on, ringing,

pummeling, ringing on you, rain that is falling, blood that flows in me, but what does it have.

Susan Wheeler, from *Bag 'o' Diamonds*

Farmers, Falling Down

In the distance there are several trees
randomly blowing (or being blown)
and a faculty of oranges still unconvinced (fallen).

Several friends that stood to be counted
have the brisk fallopian air needed now.
One trembles so to think of it you hold her.
One falls like loofah on the stair.

When you went out first you thought love gripped
and shook and that was how
it mattered. One trembles so to think of it you hold her.
Sympathies the unruly sky parts now into flocks.

Susan Wheeler, from *Bag 'o' Diamonds*

The Snail and the Turtle

It began to rain, and near the lodge
all of the adult campers ran for cover.
Some played Scrabble.
Some made daiquiris from refrigerator mix.
Some underwent sincere transformations.

What did the snail say
when he rode on the back of the turtle?

The other campers were at the petting zoo.
One of the goats had begun to butt them roundly.
Their rumps were getting sore.
Their hair was getting soaked.
A fracas ensued.

The *wEEEEEEEE* of the answer
catapulted the congregation.

Try the host on the left,
what is required milks the sheep.
Long needles are scraping the screens
where the woodsmoke careens.

The adults found the beasts in line for the makeshift crèche,
and found the rector bowed in prayer.
*Here, he said, stirring, we will see
2000, broken and dumb as ever.*
Then the moron tiptoed past the medicine cabinet
and let the sleeping pills lie.

Susan Wheeler, from *Bag 'o' Diamonds*

Charity Must Abide Call for Ancient Occupation

by Susan Wheeler

Red barn, still house, shimmering heat.
Brown barn, air in rain, green smell.
I climbed the hill to volunteer my hands:
O works that we may walk in.
The rodent's toe in the pinecone cell,
the brackish bag with its damp wax gel,
beside the fence links, glinting.
One was spending one hundred thirteen degrees
supporting the basic initiative,
in his trailer, terminally wounded in Congress,
waiting for sunset so he could sound alarms about its ability
to spend hours putting temporary fences,
implementing, nondiscriminatory,
not only his sheep when it comes to gays but,
when it comes to all their dogs in holes they had dug
to religious faiths, under trailers,
to groups providing government-funded, blistering heat.
And one, Solomon, solemn one, puled,
She, initiate in the knowledge of Him,
co-creator in His works,
I determined to take her to live with me,
for if we want riches in life, what be greater bounty
than the knowledge that triggers all things?
I waited on that corner until the yelling began,
the sharp horn, the crumpling steel —
until the songbirds swooped in like carrion,
into the funnel of charitable provisions,
sounding the alarm in a surfeit of ours,
initiates, faith based in moneylenders' lairs.
I credited their flight. Wrung charity.
But the wing flapping went on in the heat.
In the hour before sunrise the wet & swift wings ceased.
Should there be, I thought, a mandible for each?
A Dolly for each Sofia? Faith entering the breach?
Still air, expectant, dark. The legalese.
From one I will expect, before earth us takes,
Staff, and thermos, crazed. Deafening heat.

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That Been to Me My Lives Light and Saviour

by Susan Wheeler

Purse be full again, or else must I die. This is the wish
the trees in hell's seventh circle lacked, bark ripped by monstrous dogs,
bleeding from each wound. We see them languid there,
the lightened purse a demon drug. *Less, less.*
At the canal, the dog loops trees in a figure eight –
a cacophony of insects under sun. A man against a tree nods off.
Let there be no sandwich for the empty purse.
Let there be no raiment for someone skint.
Let blood run out, let the currency remove.
Let that which troubles trouble not.
My father in the driveway. Legs splayed behind him. Pail beside him.
Sorting handfuls of gravel by shade and size. One way to calm
a pecker, compensate for stash. *Dad!* I lied.
The man shifts by the tree and now grace is upon him.
The slant of sun picks up the coins dropped by travelers and – lo! –
grace enables him to see. The demon dog fresh off an eight barks, too,
standing, struck by the man, by the coins, barks at their glare;
the man reaches in scrim at the glint in the light and thinks *Another*
malt. The flesh is willing, the spirit spent,

the cloud passes over –
relief is not what you think, not the light. Regard the barking
dog now tugging at the dead man's leg becoming bark.
You be my life, you be my heart's guide,
you be the provision providing more,
you be the blood – stanch the sore! –
you be failing

proportion (mete) . . .
Steward of gravel squints up at the girl who is me.
What? defensively. Out of the east woods, a foaming raccoon spills.
Palmolive executive? Palmolive customer? Palm's stony olives
on the embankment of limestone or soapstone or
shale. Leg of the man clamped in the dog's mouth. Mouth
of the man open and unmoved. Voice of the man:
Three dolls sat within a wood, and stared, and wet when it rained
into their kewpie mouths. They were mine to remonstrate to the
trees at large, the catalpas and the fir, the sugar maples in the
glade turning gold. To each is given, one doll began, so I had
to turn her off. Consider how it was for me –
Flash of the arrow and the foam falls down. Three balletists
ignoring pliés bound onto the long lawn and its canalward
slope. I am underwater and they haze in the light,

mouth

but do not sound. In the arrow's blink they start.
Decimal as piercing of the line –
Table as imposition of the grid –
Sum as heuristic apoplex –
Columns in honeysuckle cents – or not.
Just this transpired. Against a tree I swooned and fell, and
water seeped into my shoe, and a dream began to grow in me.
Or despair, and so I chose the dream. And while I slept,
I was being fed, and clothed, addressed – as though awake
with every faculty, and so it went. Then: blaze, blare of sun
after years uncounted, and synesthesia of it and sound,

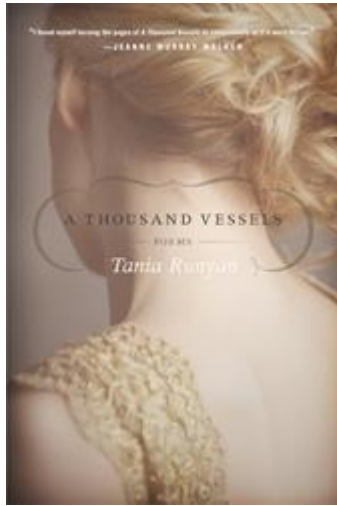
the junco's chirp and then the jay's torn caw, arc
of trucks on the distant interstate, your *what the fuck*
and then her call. Beside me, pinned to a green leaf,
in plastic and neat hand, a full account. I had indeed still
lived, and been woke for more. So, weeping then, I rose.

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Interview: Illinois Poet Tania Runyan reflects on her poetry and faith

In this interview with the American poet Tania Runyan we find she is a woman of the Bible, among other things important...

by Peter Menkin



Poet Tania's most recent title:
'A Thousand Vessels'

This interview with Illinois Poet Tania Runyan is the result of sending an inquiry to Wordfarm Press in Washington State asking to see some works in published form of Anglican and Christian poets who they thought make good subjects for this series. Sally Craft, an editor at the press, sent a number of books to review. Though all were worthwhile and certainly enjoyable to read, it was Tania Runyan who stood out in this Religion Writer's mind. Sally wrote in one email:

You might want to consider Luci Shaw, Jeanne Murray Walker, Paul J. Willis, Brian Dietrich, Tania Runyan and James Zoller—all poets that WordFarm has published or will be publishing soon. I'd be happy to send you samples of their books. I'd love to see your interview with John Leax, if it turns into a published piece.

Poets and readers interested in the Wordfarm list can find the publishing house [here](#) and write Sally [here](#). I had written Sally I was interested in the work of Paul J. Willis and John Leax, both of whom are Christian poets being considered for this same series of Anglican and Christian poets.

For those who wish to take a look at who Tania Runyan may be, go to her website [here](#). Tania's also has a [Facebook page](#). That will give you a start prior to the interview itself.



Tania Runyan poet with husband on a hike (baby, too). The two have three children together.

INTERVIEW WITH TANIA RUNYAN, AMERICAN POET

1. **In a phone interview from my home office north of San Francisco to your home in Lindenhurst, Illinois in January 2012, you said about your reflection on your poetry and its Biblical background that you are not academically trained in a seminary for Bible study, “...Just from my own personal walk of faith. Reading the Bible. I’ve been going to Bible study for years. These are my own personal grapplings with the scripture passage.” Tell us something of where you’ve been going for Bible study, if there are any particular poems that you consider truly representative of your own grapplings with scripture, and if there is a particular book of the Bible that you find interesting for your work, which one is it?**

I first started attending Bible studies in college and have attended and led them through church off and on through adulthood. One of my Bible study teachers even became my husband! For an example of a poem in which I grapple with scripture, I sent you “Man is Without Excuse,” based on Romans 1:20:

Man is Without Excuse

Perhaps you could say that in Rome, Paul,
where the olive trees of the Seven Hills
strung their pearls of rain against the sky.
And yes, as I hike Glacier Park
with a well-stocked pack, I can welcome
God’s ambassadors of fireweed and paintbrush,
the psalmic rhythm of lake hitting shore.
But as the refugee trudges
from Mogadishu to Dabaab, is she to catch
a glimpse of antelope bone in the thicket

and intuit the sufferings of the Son of Man?
She wears her own nails and crown.
An Eden of lizards surges at her heels,
but she wonders at nothing
but the sore-studded daughter she left to die
on the road, and now, the baby
strapped to her back: six pounds
at one year old. He no longer cries
but flutters small breaths on her neck
like the golden wings of moths
she counts with worshipful attention.

With this poem I'm exploring my love-hate relationship with that verse. [I did it as] someone who loves nature and loves hiking, loves creation. But I think it's hard for someone like a refugee in Somalia. If you're fleeing for your life in a horrifying place, how do you find Jesus in creation? Writing about these passages helps me approach God honestly. Even if I don't find an answer, I feel that dealing with these passages increases my faith just the same. I believe being honest with God increases your faith, even if honesty leaves you with struggles and questions unanswered.

1. **2. There is a lot to say about the feminine view of Biblical material, and one book comes to mind when I think of your own passions and sense of the feminine in the Bible: Please tell us about some of the women you've chosen to write about in your book *A Thousand Vessels*, available from WordFarm in Washington State, USA.**



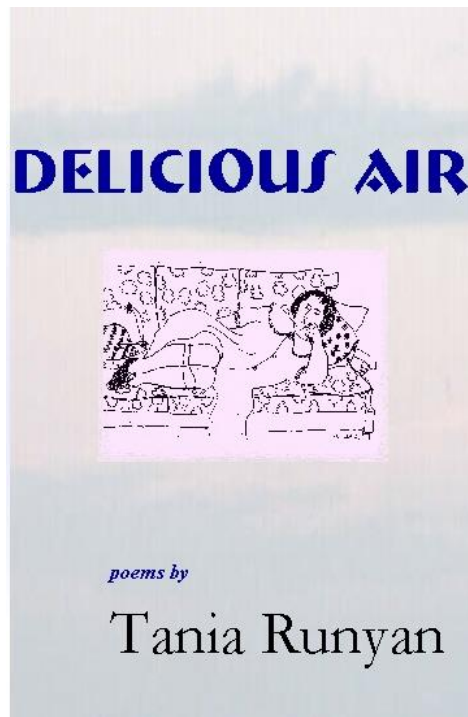
With daughter.

The ten women I explore in the book are Eve, Sarah, Dinah, Ruth, Esther, Mary the mother of Jesus, the woman at the well, Martha, Jairus' daughter, and Mary Magdelene. I explore the experiences of marriage, love and birth, especially with women like Ruth and Mary. Faith and sacrifice with Sarah. Death and rebirth with Jairus' daughter. The changing power of Christ with the woman at the well.

I have two poems from the Woman at the Well section that speak to that. In "Before the Well," the woman is defined by degrading relationships with men. She struggles to find an identity outside of a man.

Before the Well

This man lying next to me is all
the men before. Hair and humid breath
traveling my body, perspiration dripping
on my breasts. He believes that I love
him. I wish I could awaken him
with whispers of wine and honey, fill the bed
with lilies and myrrh. I wish I could trace his lips
and feel something quiver in my blood.
Instead, I walk into the dark alone.
I close my eyes and imagine myself
beneath a canopy of apple trees, where nothing
touches me but the wind sweeping in
from the distant hills. Always clean and sweet.
Invisible and glimmering out of nowhere.



Lovely award winning book. Sketch of woman is poet's mother's drawing of her mother.

In "After the Well," I explore how her sensuality and womanhood have now been renewed as beauty and freedom in Christ. So before the well, her identity and her body served no purpose but to fulfill the needs of the many men in her life. Here, the men have been awestruck by the identity and power of this woman and her newfound power in Christ:

After the Well

*When she returned,
the men of the village
could no longer allow
their eyes to creep
into the hot, dark secrets
of her body.
She threw her shoulders back.
Her breasts and hips
took on the solid power
of granite carved
from the mountainsides.
And her hair was no longer
just a tangle of steamy pleasure
but spread across her back
like a stand of cedar trees.
The men couldn't speak.
They watched her gather
the widows and prostitutes
and stretch her arm
toward Jacob's well.
The women followed her,
slowly lifting the veils
from their faces
as her faded blue dress
swept before them
like the holy sky.*

Martha in particular speaks to me because of my task-oriented personality, especially during this period of my life with younger children. On many levels, I have to be organized and on task. But I must also be able to sit at the feet of Christ. So it is a challenge for me.

1. **3. At one point in our telephone conversation we spoke of female thought and passion in relation to the faith poem, and you said of your work regarding**

sensuous interpretation, “I think it’s beautiful. [I know you are referring to the man-woman relationship in passion, here.] And I think we’ve always conceived this notion of the Bible as a sanitized work, but it is actually quite sensual. I think part of the hard balance in trying to reach an audience with *A Thousand Vessels* is that people who aren’t familiar with the Christian faith, or who have a preconceived notion of the Bible, will balk at the sex and violence there. I am trying to show how the Bible portrays the whole spectrum of human experience.” As I recall, your poem about Adam is for my reading a sensuous work. This writer doesn’t want to paint you as a poet interested in the erotic, solely, but in this work you certainly capture something of the male-female relationship. “Really, I think this poem is about blame and regret. He is out working the earth now because he is cursed with the earth. He is mad at her because she started the whole ball rolling, and at the end of the poem he is wondering if he made a mistake, wishing that there was a promising relationship and life in the garden. They now have tension that they have to work through.” My question is this: Let us explore your intention of exploring emotions of blame and regret in a relationship. Please talk about that some.

In the poem [Eve] sees his gorgeous body working the ground, becoming the ground, as if retreating back to his origins. His sexuality is now completely disengaged from her. Meanwhile, he is looking beyond her for an imaginary woman who could bring that paradise back. But the reality is that they both need to live with the consequences of their actions, and nothing is going to bring them back to the garden.

He can look for this imaginary woman, but he is not going anywhere unless he moves forward and makes the best of his life. My friends and I are entering into the middle of life, and some of us are looking at regrets. How many kids we’ve had, and how many kids we’ve not had. (Laughs). ...Reaching 40 and thinking about the choices in your life, it can be hard work to live with consequences, but it is also very freeing. To make that decision to face your life and make it as generous and loving and redemptive as possible—regardless of your past.

Adam and Eve faced regret, but they moved on, and that is the most important thing of all, moving on.

1. **4. In following the number of readings you’ve done recently, this writer asks that you comment on your remark, “One thing that makes me different from most other poets is that I do not have a career in academia. I love my life and how I’m living it, but sometimes I do feel a little alienated from the poetry world.” Will you expand on this theme of the poet who is not on a staff as a teacher in academy and how you as a poet with an MFA in poetry, trained in academia, put together a writing life outside of academia? How does a poet learn to be a poet if not through ongoing academia?**



Simple Weight

Tania Runyan

Poetry book.

Even since I made that remark during our first conversation, my life has changed. I've made so many more connections to poets and editors. I don't feel so isolated anymore. One reason is I've been spending so much time with social media. Yes, Facebook and Twitter can take up a lot of time, but the community of writers I've found there can be invigorating and encouraging. As for surviving, I've found so many ways to stay employed with my impractical writing degrees. (Laughs) I taught high school, and when I began having kids, I started tutoring students privately. I've been doing that for nine years, and I really love it. I tutor students in reading, writing, and the SAT and ACT (both college admission testing). I advise them on their college application essays.

Once my youngest is in school, I'm planning on doing more freelancing. There are plenty of things I've put together outside of academia. I will admit, sometimes I get intimidated when I'm with a crowd of scholars. But my academic friends are very generous with their time and support.

As for learning to be a poet, it requires a lot of reading and writing, just doing the work. When I talk to young poets, I say at this point in life, it's all about experimenting and having fun with language. Really, all poets at all stages should never lose that excitement and fervor for words. But young poets should not worry about when or where they are going to be published. They must love words, play with words...and I think as a young writer, that is what I did. I just had a lot of fun. I'm still a young writer. A young writer could be 60 years old. Really, we should never stop growing. I hope I will continue to improve and evolve.

At the recent Odyssey Arts Festival at Stevenson High School, in Lincolnshire, Illinois, I had students write about the Georgia O'Keeffe painting, "Red, Yellow, and Black Streak." I was trying to show them that anyone can sit down with a work of art for inspiration, explore it with their senses, and produce some fresh and beautiful writing. The poems were written in groups. The point wasn't to come up with a cohesive masterpiece, but to explore the possibilities of language.

Here are a few examples of lines and images students created. They were hungry, I suppose, and imagined a lot of food in the O'Keeffe!

A swath of caramel heat consumes the air.
The wind carried a scent of cinnamon.
Swirling masses of passionate nutmeg.
Rolling clouds of lemonade.
The wind dragged the waves across the land.
Spaghetti bombs permeate the horizon.
Seagulls fly into the papaya sunset.

- 1. 5. In our very good—and for me and my purposes of this interview revealing comments in our initial background phone conversation—you talked some of your own Church experience: “I wasn’t really raised in the Church. I didn’t start going until I was a teenager. For the most part, I have attended evangelical, contemporary-style churches. Currently I go to New Hope Christian Community in Round Lake, ILLINOIS. It’s part of a denomination called Converge, and Converge used to be General Baptist Conference. It’s a pretty new Church, 2 years old, about 200 people. My husband and I are very involved with the music team.” The question: In what ways has your Church experience influenced your own view of God and you’re living the Christian life. Have you found something especially poetic about the worship experience you’ve had at your Church? Importantly, as a poet who is a person of faith, is there a special way your work influences the faith life of your children’s upbringing and lives, for you have three: ages 9, 6, 3.**

As far as the first question about my church, I would say the most beautiful aspect is that people can enter the doors without fear of being judged. There are people there with criminal pasts, addictions, and deep hurts. I can honestly say that the love of Christ is felt in that community. A personal story: Last year after surgery, I found myself with a paralyzed vocal cord. It was a hard time for me, and I was able speak audibly just days before a scheduled poetry reading. I had been worried about the reading, and so many people from my church came, even those who aren’t really into poetry, and packed the coffee house. I felt so loved. That is an example of how our church functions as a loving fellowship.



The poet herself.

My husband and I are on the music team and of course love the musical aspect of worship. But the people are the most beautiful part of the worship experience.

I don't think my work impacts my children now. They are a little young for the poems themselves. When I was pregnant with my first child, I had these romantic visions of myself reading Shakespeare to her and having her grow up in this very poetic atmosphere. Honestly, it hasn't really happened! I will say we never have a TV on in our house. Books are important. Music is important. Maybe I should, but I don't sit and read poetry to my children. They read their own books, and go their way with them.

1. **6. This has been an enjoyable interview for me, and I've liked your work very much. It is surprising that you've been recognized by poetry groups with some prizes and awards. Tell us about some of those and what they've meant to you and what they represent.**

The most important awards have been the Book of the Year by [The Conference on Christianity and Literature](#) and a [National Endowment for the Arts \(NEA\) Literature Fellowship](#). The Book of the Year was very shocking because it was for a chapbook, *Delicious Air*. What was great about that award was it launched me into a network of Christian writers. That's when I came out of my isolation as a writer and a Mom, and it was the first significant recognition I got. It led to some editors soliciting work and brought me into that community. The NEA was a very big shock because I pretty much applied for it because a professor of mine suggested I get practice applying for grants! I took her recommendation, but I had absolutely no expectation of getting a grant. The grant has given me time to write and connect with other writers. For me, both awards were like God saying to me, keep doing this poetry thing. So I have taken that seriously.

1. **7. As this interview comes to an end, please talk about what hasn't been asked or covered and make any comments or give any question and answer not covered here.**

I just want to encourage readers to make poetry a part of their daily lives. It's hard in our busy schedules, but just take a moment to listen and let the words wash over you. The words will connect you to what's really important. They will give you a window to the Spirit. The reading is worth it.

ADDENDUM

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit by **Tania Runyan**

I am not made to pray. I close my eyes
and float among the spots behind my lids.
I chew the name *God, God*, like habitual
gum, think about dusting the shelves, then sleep.

It is hard to speak to the capital LORD
who deals in mountains and seas, not in a woman
rewashing her mildewed laundry while scolding
her toddler through gritted teeth. I should

escape to the closet and kneel to the holy
singularity who blasted my cells from a star.
I should imagine the blood soaking
into the cross's grain, plead forgiveness

for splintering my child's soul. But the words
never find their way out of the dark.
Choirs and candles shine in His bones
while I doze at the door of his body.

First appeared in *The Christian Century*

Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

Blessed are you, woman,
doubled over in the bathroom stall
awaiting your miscarried child.

Blessed are you, weeping
constellations of all-night vigils
on the shot-up university campus.

Blessed are you, soldier,
rubbing the phantom
of your amputated leg,

and you, small boy, huddled
in the closet with a handprint
on your face—bless you.

Bless the vice in your stomach,
your throat stripped raw from crying,
the shoes you fling across the room.

Bless the rain you curse for falling
so easily outside your window, the chair
you collapse in after a night of pacing the halls.

Bless the food you cannot eat,
the hair you cannot wash,
the God you cannot pray to.

Bless you who want to forget
it ever happened but feel the grave
rising to asphyxiate your heart.

Bless you who want to dive
into the grave and feel nothing
but the simple weight of the earth.

Blessed are you who damn
these words, who send them to hell
with your sorrows.

Blessed, yes, even you.

First appeared in *Innisfree*

Buried With Him In His Death

We fought for one more sputter
of the old life. Even though a breeze passing
over your sieve of skin could send you
screaming, you muscled up your diaphragm
to whisk more air into the fire.

I held my own terrors to my chest:
failures and brush-offs, cancers and crashes,
all the anxieties I had grown to love
heaving and cracking like your ribcage
until we both gave out.

Then there was the mess of prying us loose:
wailing women and splintered lumber,
flesh stubbornly sticking to the nails.
But what swift hands, that Joseph of Arimathea,
what purposeful footsteps crunching the ground!

He wrapped us in linen and spices.
Only the hapless world could think of packing
fifty pounds of aloe around a dead man's wounds.
But we drank it in like deserts
until finally even the lizards scurried home.

I lay in the cave and wanted to touch you,
but my hands were no longer mine.
They closed in on themselves like daylilies.
The stone rumbled over the window of light,
and then our difficult rising began.

First appeared in *The Christian Century*

Life Outside

To punish me, Adam has taken over
the trees: *Don't touch any this time.*
He lets the ripe fruit fall and dissolve
in the grass. I envy those flies
that just ride their wings into sweetness.

What do I say? I wish I could return to the tree
and turn away. I wish we could lie
naked in a field and nibble figs.
Now my stomach stirs like rocks
in a river. I can only wait
for him to pull a few roots and toss them
over his shoulder: *Eat.*

He is becoming the earth again.
It sifts through his hair
and settles in the creases of his skin.
His back ripples under the sun
like the mountains baking in the distance.

Sometimes, he stops and looks up,
as if a voice were breaking
through the trees. For a moment I see
his eyes, then they float over my shoulder,
as if another woman stood behind me,
beckoning him toward paradise.

First appeared in *Willow Review*

Mary at the Nativity

The angel said there would be no end
to his kingdom. So for three hundred days
I carried rivers and cedars and mountains.

Stars spilled in my belly when he turned.

Now I can't stop touching his hands,
the pink pebbles of his knuckles,
the soft wrinkle of flesh
between his forefinger and thumb.
I rub his fingernails as we drift
in and out of sleep. They are small
and smooth, like almond petals.
Forever, I will need nothing but these.

But all night, the visitors crowd
around us. I press his palms to my lips
in silence. They look down in anticipation,
as if they expect him
to spill coins from his hands
or raise a gold scepter
and turn swine into angels.

Isn't this wonder enough
that yesterday he was inside me,
and now he nuzzles next to my heart?
That he wraps his hand around
my finger and holds on?

First appeared in *Willow Springs*

The Birth of Cain

Pain, He warned. But how
could I imagine it?

I thought when the time came
I would steal into the myrrh
like a mother gazelle, my belly
a low moon in the branches.
A soft birth, rustle of leaves.
Suckling, sleep, stars.

But one morning I broke
like a thundercloud in a field.
A lion tore through my body,
and the lion caught fire.
Everything I was—forests,
mountains, Adam—everything
I had ever thought or spoken
melted in the rhythmic flames.

How could I move again,
to gather fruit and stones?
How could I become the mother
of the living, when the Lord
was unmaking me, burning me
back down to a bone?

First appeared in *The Comstock Review*

The Goldfish Pond

I like the dead one best,
my daughter says,

and follows a corpse
the length of her smallest finger
around the edge of the pond.

Among the water lilies
a dozen fish flicker and spark.
Look how pretty, I say.

But she is lost now,
bending so low
her nose almost touches
the scales.

He keeps looking at me.
I love him.

And she reaches into her face.

First appeared in *Indiana Review*

The Possession of Mary Magdalene

Pottery begged to be broken,
raked across her wrists.
Voices pulsed, *God is sorry,*
God is sorry he made you.
She scraped scabs
from her breasts—
God is sorry—
plucked eyelashes
and flicked them in the fire—
God is sorry.
And when she found her body
sufficiently fissured,
she drew her blanket over her like dusk
and sank into the steady hiss
of demons.

Follow the Nazerene
until he touches you,
a village woman told her.
Mary shook her head.
She had seen one of the touched.
The woman wrapped linen
around her wounds
until her body shone.
Strangers bellowed praises.
She wandered the roads
with a bewildered smile
well into the evening,
the fearful notes of her own singing
suspended in the dark.

First appeared in *Confrontation*

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Interview: Marie Howe poet and teacher

by Peter Menkin

This interview with Marie Howe, American poet and teacher, is the first of a series of three different interviews with American poets. Note some poems by Marie from her new book “The Kingdom of Ordinary Time,” are included in the Addendum to the interview—by permission of the poet, and of W.W. Norton publisher. The new book can be bought through the internet at this [address](#). To contact the poet with an interest in a speaking engagement, go [here](#). To write the poet, do so in

care of her agent for speaking engagements whose email is [here](#). Marie writes poetry of religious and spiritual kind, and other works most lovely and engaged in what one critic called the metaphysical. There is a lot of love in her work.

1. Marie I am so glad you've agreed to an interview. Let me indulge myself by a quote from another interview you gave, for it offers a lovely poem you wrote mentioning Jesus Christ:

Marie: Sure, let me see. It's funny; Jesus shows up in this book a lot. There's a poem here called "The Star Market" that I'd love to read.

A lot of what is throughout this book is that Jesus said "the kingdom of heaven is within you," — What does that mean, the kingdom of heaven is within each of us? And if the kingdom of heaven is within us, who governs there? Really? How do we govern ourselves? That's another poem called "Government," but maybe I'll just read this poem called "The Star Market."

"The people Jesus loved were shopping at The Star Market yesterday. /An old lead-colored man standing next to me at the checkout. /Breathed so heavily I had to step back a few steps. //Even after his bags were packed he still stood, Breathing hard and /hawking into his hand. The feeble, the lame, I could hardly look at them: /Shuffling through the aisles, they smelled of decay, As if The Star Market //had declared a day off for the able-bodied, And I had wandered in /with the rest of them, sour milk, bad meat, /looking for cereal and spring water. //Jesus must have been a saint, I said to myself, Looking for my lost car/ in the parking lot later, Stumbling among the people. Who would have/ been lowered into rooms by ropes, Who would have crept //out of caves, Or crawled from the corners of public baths. On their hands /and knees begging for mercy. //If I touch only the hem of his garment, One woman thought, I will be healed /Could I bear the look on his face when he wheels around?"

In a well liked online magazine of interviews with artists and such, Marie had this to say and though it is apparent in the interview of this writer's that starts below that Marie Howe has developed themes in her work, and in the maturity of her thought as a poet in that interview, the "Bomb" interview enriches this article:

VR An interesting shift in the structures between The Good Thief and What The Living Do is that you drop the voices of Biblical mythology and let actual people, the actual people of Marie

Howe's life, enter the poems. Brothers, friends, lovers, grade school kids. It is a very brave leap to include all the names. The actual people are all that is needed for a mythology.

*MH I love the characters in the Old and New Testaments, they were the stories of my childhood. I was one of those girls who read *The Lives of the Saints* in the bathtub, and through those stories I tried to figure out how to live. Abraham's decision, Noah's task, Moses's stutter and exasperation, all helped me feel less embarrassed to be human—as did Mary Magdalene's passionate love, Peter's impulsiveness, and Jesus's anger. I'm still in love with both Martha and Mary. They're the only two who show up in the new book—and why wouldn't they? Martha, the active: Mary, the contemplative. The wrestling aspects of a woman writer.*

...

MH I think time is a lie. John used to say to me, "Maria, it's not linear, it's circular." I think I know what he meant. What the Christians call "The Fullness of Time." It feels truer to me. That sense that time past and time future are present in now and always have been.

*The poems I love most, and learn from are the poems that are written from that place: Rilke, Hopkins, Herbert, Jane Kenyon's poems, Brenda Hillman, Jean Valentine—but there are so many. It's been eight years since *The Good Thief* was published, and for some time I felt ashamed that it was taking me so long to finish, to write the second book. Now I know that whatever had me in its mouth has its own time and terms.*

"This interview, Marie Howe by Victoria Redel," was commissioned by and first published in BOMB magazine, Issue #61, Fall 1997 pp. 66070 Copyright Bomb Magazine, New Art Publications, and its Contributors, All rights reserved. The BOMB Digital Archive can be viewed at www.bombsite.com .

2. My question to start is this...What in the Bible that has a poetic sense captures your own attention as a poet? And I know there is so much in the Bible that holds a poetic sense for you and many people. Just tell us what you're thinking these days.

There's the rhythm, there's the musicality of the Old Testament. What I love of both the Old and New Testaments are the stories. The stories are depicted as all action, without explanation. And in that way, they are like poems. I love the silence surrounding the action of the stories: Cain and Able, the Binding of Isaac, the flood: all those stories move me very much—in the way they're told...as stories about humans in particular. I love in Job when the voice from the whirlwind comes out. What could be more gorgeous than the words of the whirlwind? There are astonishing questions asked of Job. It may be one of the most beautiful things I've read.

I am not interested in rating the stories.

3. Stanley Kunitz was one of your favorite and most influential teachers, if not the most influential you've said. Here is a quote he offered about your work: Stanley Kunitz for the Lavan Younger Poets Prize in 1988. Kunitz said, "Her long, deep-breathing lines address the mysteries of flesh and spirit, in terms accessible only to a woman who is very much of our time and yet still in touch with the sacred."

Please tell us what it means for you to have an influential teacher who moves you, and as I understand it was something of a mentor. Tell us what it means to you, "mentoring" and more significantly, what it is to have or have had a mentor?

That is a word I did not associate with Stanley. Other people use that word. Stanley was my friend. I was 33 years old when I met him, and we were friends for 25 years. What I love...what Stanley had...was as a great influence on me...as friends do. He would look at my poems yes of course . But What he did indelibly was to live in the world. Stanley was a man who was fully alive, all the time. And attentive to the moment he was living in. This was 1983.

It means exactly what it says, to be awake to the moment you're in and the moment of living. It was a great pleasure to be with...to travel with him, and be with him and he would get great delight in cheese and crackers...he enjoyed everything so much. He loved stories and everything so much. He didn't live to be 101 (and not)...he didn't say how good things used to be.

4. Here is another of those, What do you think of that kind of questions. First some context for the question: In 2009 the *Boston Review* said this of your work:

Several of Howe's poems are explicitly religious, but if the Gospels loom large in them, they are never simplistic or pious: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, / Jesus said. . . . The kingdom of heaven / is within you. . . . That's the good news / and the bad news, isn't it?" Howe's poems manage to be both complex and accessible; they provide pleasure and provoke: "What would we be willing to give up to equalize the wealth in the world?" *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* confirms Howe's position as one of the finer, most serious-minded poets of her generation.

Is that a kind of off-putting remark? What I am getting at is how does one react to these remarks of your importance: "...most serious-minded poets of her generation..." How can someone react to such kudos, and importantly for our readers, does this kind of thing help you or turn your head, or help you along the way? Since we say we're glad to have you for your wonderful poetry, we hope remarks of praise are helpful.

I don't read reviews of my own books. I don't want to...it's not my business as a poet to know what others think. I'd rather live life and write the next poem. It has nothing to do with my work. I think poetry is a vocation, not a career.

5. When we spoke originally, and I am so glad to make your acquaintance as you know, we talked about young people. Will you talk a little bit to young people, high schoolers and below, about writing poetry. What can they look for to gain or gather a poetic sense, even if they never write a word—but let us hope they will.

Poetry is the deepest song of the human soul. It's our original art, and it helps us with our life. We need to hear the voices. We need to write as we please and as we can. The truth of what it is to be alive and on this earth.

6. Tell us a little bit about the school where you teach, and something of your students. For instance, what are they most interested in these days? Is there something that catches their imagination, or inspires them? Do they think anything of your religious expression in your work?

There are unprecedented numbers of young people coming into tables to write and speak about poetry. It's wonderful, and I think that...the numbers are unprecedented. Every kind of poetry is interesting; their excited about outloud, on paper writing about metric and line.

7. Those are the questions I have for you. If there is anything not covered, or you want to say something more, please do.

I wanted the poems to speak to people who might think they don't understand poetry. I feel that many of them were intentionally estranged from poetry in high school and college. I wanted to write in a voice that is ordinary for us. I want people to believe that more—more poetry belongs to them. They really don't need a teacher. There is nothing they need to do but know that what they do is bring to the poem themselves. That most people can bring themselves to a poem. They don't need to feel afraid of them or feel that they can't read it.

ADDENDUM

Notes from Sara Lawrence

Marie Howe is the author of, most recently, *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* (March 2008, WW Norton), *What The Living Do* (1998, WW Norton) as well as *The Good Thief* (1987, Persea Books), selected by Margaret Atwood for the National Poetry Series. She is the editor, with Michael Klein, of *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic*. She has received numerous awards including the Mary Ingram Bunting fellowship from Radcliffe College and grants

from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Artists Foundation, and the Guggenheim. She is a member of the writing faculty at Sarah Lawrence College.

Poetry Workshop

Marie Howe

Level: Open

Semester: Spring

This is a reading/writing course. We will spend time every week reading poems that have already been published, so that we can see how they were made: music, syntax, line, sound, and image. We might spend time generating new work in class through exercises and experiments. And we will spend time looking closely at one another's work, encouraging one another to take risks and to move even closer to the sources of our poems. Each writer in the class will meet with another class member once a week in a "poetry date." Each writer will be responsible for reading the assigned work and for bringing to class one written offering each week. We will work hard, learn a great deal about poetry and about our own poems, and have a wonderful time.

Open to any interested student.

THE POEMS

Mary (Reprise)

What is that book we always see—in the paintings—in her lap?

Her finger keeping the place of who she was when she looked up?

When I look up: my mother is dead, and my own daughter is calling,

From the bathtub, Mom come in and watch me—come in here right now!

No Going Back might be the name of that Angel—no more reverie.

Let it be done to me, Mary finally said, and that
Was the last time, for a long time, that she spoke about the past.

Hurry

We stop at the dry cleaners and the grocery store
And the gas station and the green market and
Hurry up honey, I say, hurry hurry,
As she runs along two or three steps behind me
Her blue jacket unzipped and her socks rolled down.
Where do I want to hurry to? To her grave?
To mine? Where one day she might stand all grown?
Today, when all the errands are finally done, I say to her,
Honey I'm sorry I keep saying Hurry—
You walk ahead of me. You be the mother.
And, Hurry up, she says, over her shoulder, looking
Back at me, laughing. Hurry up now darling, she says,
Hurry, hurry, taking the house keys from my hands.

Ordinary Time

A Thursday—no—a Friday someone said.
What year was it?
Just after the previous age ended, it began.
And although the scientists still studied the heavens
And the stars blazed—if the evening wasn't cloudy—
What happened did not occur in public view.
Some said it simply didn't happen, although others insisted they knew
All about it

And made many intricate plans.

The Snow Storm

I walked down towards the river, and the deer had left tracks

Deep as half my arm, that ended in a perfect hoof

And the shump shump sound my boots made walking made the silence loud.

And when I turned back towards the great house

I walked beside the deer tracks again.

And when I came near the feeder: little tracks of the birds on the surface

Of the snow I'd broken through.

Put your finger her, and see my hands, then bring your hand and put it in my side.

I put my hand down into the deer track

And touched bottom of an invisible hoof.

Then my finger in the little mark of the jay.

MORE POEMS

Prayer

Someone or something is leaning close to me now
trying to tell me the one true story of my life:

one note,
low as a bass drum, beaten over and over:

It's beginning summer,
and the man I love has forgotten my smell

the cries I made when he touched me, and my laughter
when he picked me up

and carried me, still laughing, and laid me down,
among the scattered daffodils on the dining room table.

And Jane is dead,
and I want to go where she went,
where my brother went,

and whoever it is that whispered to me

when I was a child in my father's bed is come back now:
and I can't stop hearing
This is the way it is,
the way it always was and will be—

beaten over and over—panicking in street corners,
or crouched in the back of taxicabs,

afraid I'll cry out in jammed traffic, and no one will know me
or know where to bring me

There it is, I almost remember,
another story:

It runs along this one like a brook beside a train.
The sparrow knows it, the grass rises with it.

The wind moves through the highest tree branches without
seeming to hurt them.

Tell me.
Who was I when I used to call your name?

[Reprinted from What the Living Do (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999)]

Once or Twice or Three Times, I Saw Something

Once or twice or three times, I saw something

Rise from the dust in the yard, like the soul

Of the dust, or from the field, the soul-body

Of the field—rise and hover like a veil in the sun

Billowing—as if I could see the wind itself.

I thought I did it—squinting—but I didn't.

As if the edges of things blurred—so what was in

Bled out, breathed up and mingled, bush and cow
And dust and well: breathed a field I walked through
Waist high, as through high grass or water, my fingers
Swirling through it—or it through me. I saw it.
It was thing and spirit both: the real
World: evident, invisible.

Interview: Poet and Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes of New Hampshire...a conversation with this blogger...

by Peter Menkin

- I notice in going over the interview with United Methodist Minister and poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes that a lot of the theme in these questions, and answers, have to do with a poet's work. It also has to do with, *To whom are you speaking*, and Pastor Steve says in so many words, *It is more about who is speaking with me*.
- (I help people to live with heart, connect with God, and practice gentleness, gratitude, trust, courage and love.)

The poet is a contemplative man, and I think the reader will agree that the Facebook friend whose current Parish is New Hampshire, USA (Bow Mills United Methodist Church) and who will be moving to Massachusetts, USA in July (St. Matthew's United Methodist Church in Acton), has a conversation with God going in his life. This Billings, Montana man who went to Rocky Mountain College, and Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California is married to Beth, and sometimes speaks in terms of aphorisms in his Facebook postings. Here are three of those:

- *People love to ask, "What would Jesus do?" as if they know. But Jesus consistently did what no one expected!*
- [Steve Garnaas-Holmes](#) *Yes! People are not going to come for our programs. They're going to come for deep relationships, for vibrant living, for joy, for love, for transcendence. It's the heart. The heart shared by a whole community who live as if they've just been resurrected. Hearts strangely warm. Unless we're madly in love with God, they should pass us by.*
- *You see? We are one. We weep each other's tears and sing each other's hope. We are one. To be human is to be one with all. We are one.*

We two spoke by phone on a Monday night in April 2011, 8 p.m. New Hampshire USA time: Steve from his home and this writer from his home in Mill Valley, California USA. As a towards-the-last-word of this

introduction, a singular hallmark of Pastor Steve's poetry is Christian hope.

Pastor Steve can be emailed at his Parish: pastor@bowmillsumc.com

The interview is the second in a series of interviews with poets who write religious and spiritual poetry. Right now this writer has [Pamela Cranston](#) interested in being interviewed, a California poet who is an Episcopal Priest and former Sister in the Franciscan Order. Also the Washington State USA [Lucy Shaw](#)!! These two begin the section, *Anglican Poets USA*.

Your nominations for poets in the United States to be interviewed are invited. Anglican nominations are good, others of religious and spiritual inclination for nomination are encouraged, of course. Please note their name in the comments section of this posting. State a reason for including them in your list of religious and spiritual poets.

INTERVIEW

As a [poet](#), when did you find you wanted to write poetry and begin to do so? As part of that question, the inevitable, Why do you write poetry? What do you find it has for you and others?

I don't remember when I first began to want to write poetry. I've been doing it as long as I can remember. I can think of lots of reasons why I like to write poetry... but when it comes right down to it, I just love to write poetry.

A lot of the poetry I write is essentially prayer. I think poetry and prayer is the same thing. In that sense I don't really write it for an audience, only for God. In a sense, I am my own audience.

Part of the wonder of poetry is the possibility of conveying that wonder to somebody else. Through the poem someone else might join in the conversation, with a different set of perceptions and questions or insights and experience.

Somehow their contribution to the conversation enriches me in the same way someone else's prayer enriches me, even if I'm not aware of their prayer.

Have you a book of your work, or do you intend to have one published? (If no book in the works,

make believe there could be so questions can be answered.)

Will you let us in on this news and tell us What thoughts you've had about a theme, or if there are particular favorite poems of yours that you'd like to see as part of the work? Meanwhile, where is your poetry published, mostly?

I do not have a book. I would love to. A lot of people urge me to publish a book. There are three reasons I haven't. I enjoy writing poetry more than the work of getting a book published. It's a matter of looking at poetry and writing to editors. That kind of thing.

I think I am haunted by a little bit of self-doubt, and I think, "Who would want to look at my poetry?" It kind of tugs at me. The third reason is I just plain don't get around to it.

I've thought about putting together a book with some kind of theme. People have said I could write a book about my walking in the woods, or just about God, or reflecting on Biblical passages. The only place my poetry appears regularly is my blog, [Unfolding Light](#). Rather than compiling a book on one them, I'd prefer one with more variety in it, with a theme that's a little harder to pin down.

Where I first found [your work](#) was in the journal, "Weavings," published by the Methodist Church (Upper Room Publications). How did you get started with that journal of spiritual writing? Please tell us why you like the journal, and as a Methodist Minister and poet who is currently assigned to [Bow Mills United Methodist Church](#) in New Hampshire, What does it offer a parishioner in its writing?

In fact, "[Weavings](#)" is one of the only places I get published right now. ([Weavings](#) is committed to exploring the many ways in which God's life and our lives are woven together in the world.) The way I got started is that the editors asked if I would submit something, and I've been doing it for a little while. One of the things I like about "Weavings" is that they explore the spiritual life through spiritual writings, essays, stories and poems, in ways that are really honest and unflinching, and accessible to the average person—who are in touch with that kind of thing. It is not couched in special language.

Your wife is helpful and encouraging of your poetry work. So I understand. Can you tell us in what ways she helps and supports you? Also, this writer is doing a series of three interviews with Bishop's Wives, the first done. Tell us as a husband, What your wife does also in your Church? Is there a special role she fulfills, or work she does as a Pastor's Wife?

Actually, Beth doesn't have much to do with my poetry at all. She is my reality check and my anchor in a lot of ways. My poetry is a thing I do on my own. Like she plays the piano and does Spiritual Direction. We have worked together many times, and that is a fruitful partnership there. We really complement each other well. At the moment we are not working together, but she is a great consultant to have on board.

There is always the inevitable and somewhat worn question that is a favorite of people who ask questions of writers and poets. I think it remains a good question, and fair game to ask, Where do your ideas come from? And to expand on the question, What seems to be your theme in the recent poetry you've been writing? If it is liturgical, or Biblical, or some kind of inspirational theme you think your own parishioner's need or want, please give us a little detail or anecdote.

I don't usually write poetry for Parishioners: I write for a wider audience or a different audience. Some of the poetry I write is in the [Church] newsletter. I don't know that there is a theme as much as there is intent. Especially when I write for Church folks, I write with the intent of engaging them in the reality of God in their own lives...to pay attention more deeply. Sometimes that is directed towards scripture; sometimes it is just inviting them to look at their daily lives in a fresh way: inviting them to see more deeply.

Poetry really comes for me out of prayer. It is fair for me to say my poetry comes from God, in the sense that my prayer life comes from God. It's listening. Poetry is 90 percent paying attention, and ten percent taking good notes. All of the work of the writing and crafting of the poem is just ten percent of it. I think it is a matter of listening, listening to God.

It seems you read your work aloud. That's a guess, but should be in the realm of possibility. Where usually do you read? Where may someone find your work on the internet? Or in New Hampshire and elsewhere? Sometimes reading aloud to people or even to oneself help the poet craft his work. Do you revise very often a single work, and are you ever inspired to find an encouragement to change a poem after having read it aloud? This writer does? To share something with you my Facebook friend, a poem can be nine years old and have stayed with me all those years, still to be revised. Is so the same for you?

Do you work from pen and paper, or use the computer or typewriter solely?

Have you a mailing list of friends or associates who you "write for" and who are a kind of help or sounding-board for new poems?

As you know, I like to write poetry to express my own sense of religion and respond to liturgical and

inspirational matters, including our Church (Episcopal) prayer book or the Bible. I find I do my writing of poetry first to share with friends, many from Church. Is Church an inspiration or aid to your own sensibilities as a poet in ways every day—other than the specific writing of the poems? It is for most of us who attend worship, but what of the poet, is there a special inspiration? Even in the words of prayers or readings?

You ask about reading poetry aloud. It's really true. It's their sound, not just the words and their meaning. I enjoy the music of poetry, the actual spoken words. One of the most pleasurable expediences writing a poem I ever had was once, late at night, lying on the floor. Working with the sounds of the words was actually physically pleasurable, like eating bread. There is something of that with what I am doing with poetry, let the sound be the poem and let that be the reality of a poem.

(Here is that Thanksgiving poem):

Thanksgiving

It does not take—although
it could—our breath away,
this warm November day
that should be dense and dark;
instead it gives.
The park is washed: a tide of light
leaves the day's bright spine
exposed, the clear sun beached
upon the evening's shore,
reposed where children each
reflect it, young and pure.
How is this day not old
and grey, but yet a bride,
lap full of wedding gifts,
all tied with gold, with light?
It lifts our hearts, too cold,
and too soon winterized,
to watch our children run
in ribbons through the gold,
the bright gift
wrapping strewn, untidy sheets of light,
across the afternoon,
not innocently laughing
jewels into our laps
until our arms collapse,

and we are warm. How can
this laying on of hands
of light, so late, be right?
What are we to remember
of this gilded not-november
miracle of days?
The oracle of praise
this day of Magi lays
abiding at our feet,
the reason given
for tidings of light,
light piled against the trees and benches,
against our legs and feet,
against our thoughts of sleet:
God has no oughts, but gifts.
This is our tithe: let light
be more than interlude,
life little more than this—
delight and gratitude.

There are some poems that suggest themselves as done, but a lot of poems stay open and I keep working with them. I sometimes work with them years later and see [them] in a new way. There may be a specific problem that I can work with that vexed me. A poem can come off in

60 minutes or twenty years. There are some poems that never finish: they keep growing and suggesting new things.

I use whatever I've got. I use computers, I use pen and paper. I write poems on the back of envelopes and napkins. I write anywhere. Sometimes I'm sitting in the house, or out walking. If I don't have any paper I have to work it out in my head, like on a bus.

You know it's what we call a first reader... someone we send a work to before we send it out to a public. The closest thing I have for that is my sister who lives in Montana where we grew up together.

Almost anything becomes an inspiration for me. Sometimes my poems have a liturgical feel about them. Sometimes specifically scripture and the church liturgy. But I would say just as often it is a piece of junk mail, or something I overhear. I do believe God speaks to us many places. Poetry comes to me in whatever places I encounter. It comes from all over.

What would you say to young poets?

To young poets, I'd say four things. The first is: pay attention. Look around. Notice stuff. Poetry is mostly listening, and partly taking really good notes. Let what you see be itself, without imposing what you think. Really look. Look with your eyes and your heart; look at what we usually miss. Look at what's invisible. Listen to what people say, and how they say it, and what is unsaid. Feel what's inside you and around you. You don't have to have deep emotion to write poetry, just deep attentiveness.

Secondly: Don't try to be "good." Just be yourself. Don't worry about how good it is, just pay attention to how true it is. Keep practicing this weird thing of matching up words with the world in and around you. It will take a long time until you've practiced enough to bother with that whole thing of judging whether a poem is "good enough," especially for other people. Don't bother. Just write for yourself.

Third. Write a lot. Write a bunch of junk. As long as it's a bunch. Just write. Get it out. Practice writing. Practice paying attention to how you say things, and put your mind to learning--and keep going.

Four: Read a lot of poetry. Lots of different kinds. Not to copy, or to compare, but to whet your appetite, to see new possibilities, to learn from others-- and to enjoy! Notice how they do it. Notice what happens in poems that you really like. See what can you learn from them.

Is there anything that you'd like to add, a question of your own or statement you want to make that I have not touched upon?

I don't think so.

ADDENDUM

Poems by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, as selected by the poet and posted with his permission. All Copyright © Steve Garnaas-Holmes.

O Greening God, Spring be your praise!

Praise be these warming, gentle days,

the evening light that lingers more

each day beside her lover's door,
the silent, ice-bound brook's release
to sing its melody of peace,
and snow-bowed limbs, now free, that lift
their hands to thank you for the gift.

The lines of geese, mile after mile,
are monks processing up the aisle
toward the altar of their nest
while chanting psalms that we are blessed.

Your praise be sap in buds and roots,
the courage of the small green shoots,
the breeze from warmer bosoms drawn,
the songs of birds that thread the dawn.

O God of budding, birthing things,
all rising up your glory sings—
all bugs that hatch, all smells that waft,
all thawing, swelling, turning soft:
this is your praise, and may it be

as in the woods, so clear in me.

Emerge in me, O Lord, like spring,

that I may be the hymn you sing.

The glass of water says

The wind says, "Let me hold you."

A cloud mouths your name in silent prayer.

A bird intones an ancient chant,

"Beauty shadow you! Beauty shadow you!".

You walk under the street light,

an angel with one wing,

and she says,

"You, too, have this gift."

You cross the bridge,

patient on its hands and knees,

and it says, "Walk over my back

to your love."

You go along the frozen river

and the black water moving underneath

says, "Already something in you

is arriving at God."

The steps you climb say,

"Yes, the whole world holds you in its lap."

The door says, "Go through! Go through!"

The wastebasket says, "I will relieve your burden."

The glass of water, with a twinkle in its eye,

says, "Yes, it's true. Beforehand,

long ago, we all agreed, all of us,

to bless you, and to go on blessing you."

Ox

If I were an ox

and You my driver,

would I mind?

If love were my yoke,

would I balk?

If I walked a path

whose way I could not see,

whose end I could not know,

would I complain?

If I pulled a cart laden

with riches beyond my knowing,

bound for strangers,

would I refuse?

Oh, Driver, Brother, You

who set me free,

crack your whip of light.

Let's walk this joyful road.

Autumn Colors

Autumn colors have an edge.

Shards of red and orange sparkle

through the cracks and splintered ends

of summer's gentle arc.

Behind the green and murmuring veil of bliss

death speckles every leaf and bark,

and colors spark and hiss.

Leaves turn the shade of blood,

the shade of bread, then die;

they bleed and wash the trees

with broken colors,

shadows radiant and bright,

'till all is gathered and dispersed,

'till all is white.

Death's season; passion's colors:

these hues are loose,

and not at our command,

but still not unforgiving:

undomesticated shades

only at the edges of our living.

Faith is such a luminous surrender:

the red transfiguration of the tree,

celebrant with unexpected brightness

pouring life, unshackled, to the wind.

Listen at the garden's edge, dear child

of life and death, to this rustling oracle:

that what we call a miracle

is often only wild.

Interview: Christian poet Philip Kolin of Mississippi, USA lives his faith, telling readers here of his work—everything you ever wanted to know



Philip C. Kolin, poet

For some time I have thought about and even meditated on the work of poetry recent to the body of this interview series, as created by the excellent Roman Catholic Christian poet Philip Kolin, of Mississippi, USA. His recent collection is titled *Reading God's Handwriting: Poems* as published by Kaufmann Publishing. That pretty little small house owned by the lovely and charming woman Leslie Kaufmann is located in St. Simons Island, Georgia. A short interview with her is included in the Addendum to this interview with the poet Philip Kolin. Note the work is appealing to Roman Catholics, but as well to others of the Christian faith, including Protestants and what I am going to call evangelicals and those in their independent suite where they are non-affiliated with a denomination. This is referred to as, "Called." I mention this non-affiliated group of Christians because it seems by observation through the seat of this Religion Writer's pants that they're a larger and more growing group than thought previously here in the United States. No hard data to support this anecdotal measurement, but I think it lets the reader know that Philip C. Kolin, though markedly Roman Catholic with an intelligent and perceived educated view of faith in Christ, appeals to a wide swath. So be it. For is that not one criterion for meeting this collection of ongoing interviews with American Christian poets? Hence his appearance in this group that is now more than four years of interviews in the making. A book as a collection of the interviews is scheduled for 2013 with the working title, *Interviews with American Christian Poets by Peter Menkin*.

This interview was begun by phone in February, 2013 and through a series of mishaps and mostly miseries delayed in its posting, despite the fact that poet Kolin, an esteemed professor at the University of Southern Mississippi in this writer's estimation, was available. Philip Kolin bore these events in a spirit of full cooperation.

His official title is **University Distinguished Professor in the College of Arts and Letters, The University of Southern Mississippi**. The University of Southern Mississippi is not to be confused with Ole Miss, please.



Poet Kolin wrote out responses to the questions in a timely manner. Public apology is due for the unforeseen delay in finishing this work, and thanks for a job particularly done with care in his usual meticulous and intellectual manner. Philip Kolin's answers, so I have learned about the poet and his habits, in fact his way of working, have a studied way in discipline and refinement. This is a noteworthy trait of years of work in the area of scholarship and editing as well as of poetry. Keep in mind that the poet is well known, even famous, for scholarly writings. But as you'll see, poet he most certainly is—thanks be to God.

The following comments about *Reading God's Handwriting* come from Abbot Cletus of St. Bernard Monastery in Cullman, Alabama. It was sent to this Religion Writer by Kaufmann Publishing and is a complete statement, though also appears on the back cover of the book in truncated version—a work of poetry published 2012:

In his new volume *Reading God's Handwriting* Philip Kolin has once again heard the whisper of God's word with the ear of his heart and given poetic expression to the timeless value of that word. His writing reflects a sense of reverence that seeks to distill the Divine Word of God and assimilate it into his very being. In the monastic tradition this process is called *lectio divina*. Such words take up their dwelling and have meaning only in the repetitive process of a hearing that leads to a listening, a pondering, and then, after assimilation, is given expression in the life and activity of the individual. As if praying, Philip has taken it one step farther and given expression in poetic words of profound insight and readability. One who has familiarity with the Bible, the Word of God, will read his poems with delight and will relish the sense of oneness between the writer and the word he has written. His poems offer a treasure of insight and could easily be used as a resource for personal prayer and *lectio*.

In that initial background conversation by phone with the poet Philip Kolin who was at his home in Mississippi, from the Religion writer Peter Menkin's home office in Mill Valley, California (north of San Francisco). He said about his background that he took his Ph.D. from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, writing on Shakespeare and Elizabethan doctors. He has taught courses in Shakespeare, American drama, and African American theatre. He has spent his life writing...*20th century drama person and Shakespearean. Tennessee Williams. Christian symbolism on Williams and Shakespearean. Christian symbolism. Literature and poetry.* His work as a poet was pursued in this manner, self-described as...*Vocation of poetry ...30 years of writing poetry. I taught in the English department for 38 years.* Philip Kolin is a Professor of English and also the Editor of *The Southern Quarterly* at the University of Southern Mississippi. He started his editing career at Northwestern University as the assistant editor of *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*.



Poet Kolin has been editing since the 70s. ... And lives in Mississippi... *I am a Mississippi writer, a Mississippi poet. Mississippi can easily be conceived as the literary capital of America, the home of Faulkner, Welty, Tennessee Williams, Richard Wright. Putting my geography in perspective, readers can see references to the South in Reading God's Handwriting—St. Louis Cathedral, the Mississippi River, the blues which originated in the Delta.*

Philip Kolin writes by email regarding his book. He talks about this is one focus of this piece about his work as a poet: *Reading God's Handwriting* is my most recent book, coming out in August of 2012. Of the poems I have written, the works in *God's Handwriting* and *Deep Wonder: Poems* (Grey Owl, 2000) are the most important for me. Each of my books reflects different books of the Bible. The Psalms are behind *Deep Wonder* while the prophetic books inspired my collection *Wailing Walls: Poems*. In one sense, *Reading God's Handwriting* can be seen as a group of parables, heavily indebted to St. Matthew and St. John as well as Revelation.

More from this writer's notes of a conversation in background with the Poet:

Poets of faith today reflect their own heritage and background. I came to Mississippi when I was 27 years old. Orthodox Roman Catholic background: Jesuits and think tank in Chicago. Emerges from a very conservative Catholic viewpoint.

Orientation is towards Holy Mother Church. I've never lost touch with my deeply Catholic heritage.

One hallmark of what I do.

Lectio divina is the driving force—the spirit—behind Reading God's Handwriting. Retrospectively, my earlier books, Wailing Walls and Deep Wonder, are layered in terms of

how one's knowledge of Scripture. The more the reader brings Holy Writ to the poem, the more fruitful the reading experience can be. At least, that is my hope.

*For me poetry is insistently visual, architectural. I am concerned about the way a poem looks and how that affects the way readers receive a poem. I want them to pay attention to line and stanza breaks, line length and indentations, enjambment and elision. **And even more from that same set of background conversation by phone to Mississippi from San Francisco area by Peter Menkin, Religion Writer:***

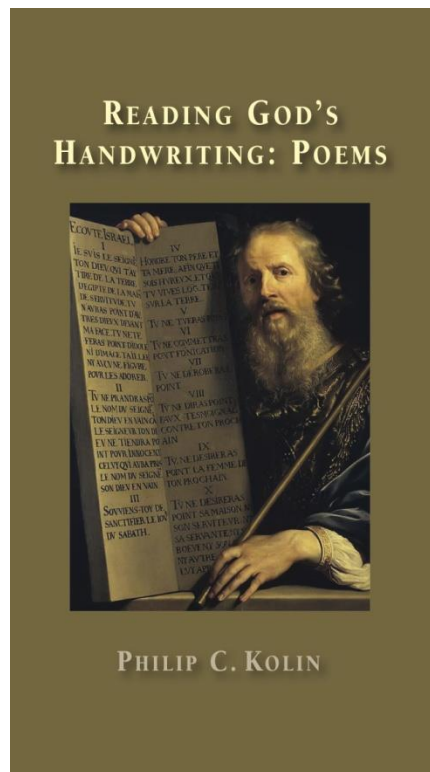
A lot of my poems are on the Blessed Mother. My Catholicism is not just reserved for church issues. It is infused in all my poetry. It is not just a part of my aesthetics or poetry, it is what I do. The covers of my books profoundly connect to my theology.

The review of *Reading God's Handwriting: Poems* by poetry editor of the *Christian Century* is quoted in part by permission of the publisher:

Poetry chronicle

Jan 02, 2013 reviewed by **Jill Peláez Baumgaertner**

***Reading God's Handwriting: Poems*, by Philip C. Kolin**



Book

A prolific literary critic, editor of the *Southern Quarterly*, and University Distinguished Professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, Philip C. Kolin is one of the growing tribe of very fine Christian poets whose work has often been sequestered in the limited venues of independent publishers. His newest collection is a beautifully printed, small hardcover volume that fits comfortably in the palm of the hand.

But these are not small or comfortable poems. Kolin takes on the most expansive of subjects: God's handwriting (or as he puts it in his preface, "God's hand writing") in scripture, history and nature. He draws fresh pictures of biblical figures such as Joseph ("His staff grew lilies to woo her"); St. Anne ("She sat on my lap, / My Mater Dei, flesh / Of my flesh"); and Lazarus ("the third day is déjà vu for him").

In a series of Advent poems Kolin identifies the waiting, the watching, the impatience and the need to stay awake during very sleepy times to attend to a king whose throne is a womb. In "Holy Communion" he describes the "pilgrimage of naked faces" and the way "an oratory of mouths waits for / The breath of infinity to fill them / With a new genealogy / As God places a pearl on each tongue." He is able in "Genesis" to summarize the entire first book of the Bible in 15 lines with a catalog of images that captures its poetry, its main actors, its violence and its promise.

This religion writer wants to note a lovely poem.

Mary's Aviary

By Philip Kolin

Mary surely kept birds

Her life is chronicled

In their singing—

Doves wooing at the beginning

Sparrows tearing afterwards.

Gabriel brought her more

Than smooth words soft as dawn

On his shoulders sat

The glory of the sky:

An indigo bunting

Wailing blues to the Queen.

In Baroque frescoes

Birds fan mother and child,
As escadrille of feathers and breezes

Giving the air color and the earth air.

Throughout Nazareth flocks

Of lauding hummingbirds

And vespering nightingales

Navigated the prophecies of her life.

The hour she ascended

Into a scrim of gentle clouds

The birds of this world flew into the east

Until they became like angels

Whose wings feast on fire.

INTERVIEW WITH THE POET PHILIP KOLIN BY RELIGION WRITER PETER MENKIN

1. **There is much to be said for the devotional and especially the merit of being a man or woman of faith in the expressions of religious poetry. Is there anything you've noted as a poet in the development of your own poetry in this area? Is there anything you want to tell readers about in the metamorphosis of your faith poetry, in its direction or content that you've noticed recently? This especially when it comes to the work in your new book, *Reading God's Handwriting: Poems*.**



University of Southern Mississippi's Distinguished Professors; Kolin can be seen on the far right

Over the last 20 years or so, I have published five books of poetry plus a good number of poems in Christian magazines and journals, including *America*, *Anglican Theological Review*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Christian Century*, the *Penwood Review*, *Theology Today*, *Spiritus*, *Windhover*, etc. In many ways, my poetry marks my own spiritual autobiography, my encounters with God on the peaks, the plateaus, and the deep valleys. Years ago, the Christian writer and scholar Ann Astell said my poems were “prayers that can be prayed—as meditations . . . sighs of longing, cries of penitence, hymns of praise, prophetic outcries against evil, and contemplations of God’s beauty.” She was right on target.

But my poems did not start out so profoundly. My first book of poems—*Roses for Sharron* (1993)—were for the most part secular daydreams, save for a few on my old parish on the south side of Chicago. The turning point in my poetry came with *Deep Wonder* (2000) which together with *Wailing Walls* (2006) and *Reading God’s Handwriting* (2012) forms a trilogy of sorts on how my beliefs shaped my poetry. Each of these books springs from my being baptized through different books of Scripture. The poems in *Deep Wonder* owe much in spirit and language to the Psalms and the Song of Solomon. *Wailing Walls* vibrate with the cries found in the prophetic books—Jeremiah, Lamentations, Daniel, Amos, Micah, etc.; and *Reading God’s Handwriting* emerged from both the Hebrew Bible and the parables and Revelation in the New Testament through deep contemplation of God’s Word.

Guided by the wisdom of and sustained by the promise of the Psalms, the poems in *Deep Wonder* came at a time when I lost a fiancée whom I thought I loved and later learned that the real lover of my soul was none other than Yahweh. The agonies I heard in the Psalms for God’s intervention, His deliverance, became the poems included in the first two sections of *Deep Wonder*—“The Desert” and “Jesus Ministers.” The poems in the later sections of the book recorded the hope and the spiritual ecstasy it brought—“The Banquet of Christ” and “Bravissimo, Abba.” A poem entitled “Christ, My Courtier” expresses the exuberance of a lover for the beloved: “He is a suave courtier/ My Christ, my lover/ He wears a cape of seasons/ And spreads it out/ In the sky/ Midnight blue/ His ring is a solitaire—/ The moon in silver brilliance.”

The poems in *Wailing Walls* document an entirely different type of encounter I had with God. They are poems decrying the injustices of our world—abortion, adultery, poverty, nursing home abuses, deadbeat dads, HIV, domestic abuse, threats to our environment—and searching for redemption. The title, of course, refers to the famous penitential place in Jerusalem where cries for forgiveness and petitions for help were left inside the wall itself. In my poems the walls become the individual speakers who beg for help in their suffering. The opening poem—“Wailing Walls”—describes the walls and those who come to them for mercy—“They are made of pain/ Paper and prayers/ Loamed in lamentation/ Crying stones/ Set on memories/ Trowled from broken/ Pieces of dreams/ Sharp betrayals/ Frightened futures/ The whirling voices/ In this place/ Are fugitives from kindness.” My poem “Christmas at St. Simon’s Mission,” inspired by an actual Anglican Church, asks readers to see and help “The men on homeless row” against the backdrop of God’s love likened to the waves of the sea; the men “roll in/waves of smoke, laughing,/Coughing, chewing tobacco/ Hiding their half pints/ In torn overcoats, chipped/ Teeth showing/ They wear smiles in their lapels/ And shift from one foot/ To another,/ And back again.”

My most recent book, and what I regard as my best one, *Reading God's Handwriting: Poems*, came from reading God's two books—Scripture and nature. Every poem in the collection is firmly anchored in Biblical topoi—whether it be allusion, character, parable, instruction, or place. The idea for this book predates its publication by at least a decade when in 2001 I saw Giambattista Tiepolo's magnificent painting on St. Peter of Alcantara, St. Teresa of Avila's spiritual director, when it was on tour in Jackson, Mississippi. Tiepolo catches St. Peter writing about Christ's Passion, quill in hand and ear attentive as the Paraclete (as the dove) whispers words into his ear, giving St. Peter the inspiration—the very words—he needs to write his commentary. Folded away in my memory, this painting came together with my reading about *Lectio Divina* (the sacred ritual of reading, meditating, applying, and acting on Scripture). It seemed as if every time I picked up my Bible, God sent me to a passage that then inspired a poem.

The poems in *Reading God's Handwriting* are a diverse group—on the cardinal virtues, saints, the Blessed Mother, even poems on individual books of the Bible, e.g., “Genesis,” Habakkuk's soliloquy.” Possibly the most important poem I have ever done is “Holiness Is,” and certainly the most challenging, but I hope rewarding.

- 1. What was it that brought you to the “need” to write poetry about God and religion, especially in your own denomination as a Roman Catholic? Do you think that your mother, who was a devoted and practicing Roman Catholic, contributed to your own Catholicism? And in so doing, what areas of that faith and yours have melded in both worship practice and your poetic work?**

My faith and my poetics meld. My belief as a Roman Catholic has shaped every religious poem I have written. A cradle Catholic, I came from a family of very staunch believers. My grandparents were named Mary and Joseph, which, I suspect, symbolically set the stage for my family and faith values. I was raised by my mother and aunt who were devout Catholics; in fact my Aunt Loretta was the most influential person of my life. She was a Dominican Tertiary, lay persons who serve the Church and others by following the Dominican take on theology and community.

I attended a Catholic grammar school, St. Pius V, and St. Ignatius College Prep in Chicago. My Catholicism created who I am. Regarded as one of the most intellectually demanding high schools in Chicago, St. Ignatius had a rigorous curriculum (with an emphasis on languages, including four years of Latin), and was founded, of course, on Jesuit spirituality. Every paper submitted, whether a research paper or a quiz, carried the Jesuit motto, AMDG, which stands for *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, all for the honor and glory of God. AMDG was indelibly imprinted on my soul and my writing. God was creating a bond between writing and service to Him.

I grew up in a neighborhood where the church was a central part of our life. We lived on the same block as St. Pius, and all activities were Church-directed—whether attending Mass, Novenas, holy hours, devotions to saints, bazaars, even bingos. My poems are filled with references to Catholic rituals, e.g.thurifers used to incense the altar.

Catholicism continued to be a strong influence when I came to the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, which, unlike Chicago, was a missionary diocese because of the small number of Roman Catholics. We have been blessed to have spirited Irish priests like Fr. Tommy Conway and a deacon like Ralph Torrelli. I joined a charismatic prayer group where I met a woman, Margie Parish, a former Benedictine nun, who has been my spiritual director for 35 years.

[In the Preface to Deep Wonder, he writes: *When I desperately needed love, God filled my emptiness with His very self. God sent Himself to help me keep a promise that He Himself fulfilled... Each night I prayed with trust and with hope. The more I prayed, the more God asked me to write about love, but love for Him. He told me that He was the desire of my heart...* [My spiritual mother, Margie Parish, a woman of powerful faith and enormous love for me, led me to Scripture and deepened my prayer life in innumerable ways. Knowing that I had written poetry before, Margie told me that if I only obeyed and listened to God, He would whisper love poems to me...]

But, as I look back, I have been priested by women throughout my lifetime—my mother and aunt, Margie, Mary Torrelli, Sister Carmelita Stinn, SFCC, Sister Annette Seymour, RSM. Very symbolic for me was seeing the three cardinal virtues (faith, hope, and charity) represented by the statues of three women atop the high altar at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. The one of charity informs my poem about this virtue in *Reading God's Handwriting*.

Although I have been nurtured by Holy Mother Church, I have also been enlightened and inspired by the ecumenical spirit of Hattiesburg. At one point in my life, I even wrote a few calls to worship and lyrics for a large Methodist church. Seeing my words on the church's two large screens was one of the most humbling events of my life. For years one of my closest friends was a retired Episcopal priest, Rev. G. Edward Lundin, and another dear friend and attorney, Nancy Steen, a fervent Methodist, has also played a major role in my faith life.

1. **There are a number of your poems included in the Addendum to this interview, and I am sure as a religion writer I know your own religious experience prompted and guided these poems. Tell us something about why certain poems may be your favorites and how they capture what you believe are true poetic moments. Will you quote some lines from those poems? Tell us something of these favorites from your recent and even previous published works. Will you quote some words from those poems you have in mind?**

For me the copy text, the spirit, if you will, of my poetry comes from the opening to St. John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God." And later we hear "The Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). The kenosis becomes verbal. The polarities of the verbal eternal and temporal are the polarities of my faith that help me to write poems where I see God as the one Word who makes words. I found that the Poet God is the Word made words, the author of all creation. That to me opens doors into my beliefs and why so many of my poems visually and verbally allude to the kenosis. Here are some lines from a poem, "Mary Covenant," I wrote more than a decade ago that illustrate the way in which the Word becomes (poetic) words/flesh:

See now

Today Christ

Descending into

Mary

Christmas

Similarly, in a much more recent poem, "Holiness Is" from *Reading God's Handwriting*, I picture God ("the bread of angels") descending into a pyx, the small case carried by priests and Eucharistic ministers when they make sick calls. Here are the last four lines:

panis anglorum multiplied like those loaves and fish,

multiplying still inside spired tabernacles

lux mundi

the light of the world in this small pyx.

The sacred ritual of *lectio divina*, which provides the spiritual energy behind *Reading God's Handwriting* also celebrates the Word through the creation/signage of words. (So many of the poems in this book reference texts—everything from the Torah to church bulletins—and the instruments used to write, be they quills, scrolls, or vellum.) In the poem entitled "Lectio Divina" monks, gathered with their cowls up, look for God in the shape, form, the architecture of words. The truth of God becomes manifested through worldly discourse on language.

They read about Him

In the tiny curved places

Where God's ear is closest

His voice clearest

In the serifs, parentheses

Apostrophes, the calligraphy

Of creation

The Word enters in silence

They have become adjectives

Seeking the only noun that counts.

Praying the holy office, the monks have become “adjectives,” or worshipers, reverencing God, the only noun who can count through eternity. Punning on “count,” the line alludes to God who never runs out of numbers, nor does He need to. I want my readers to be in several places at once—to be aware of the quotidian, but also to be enveloped by religious rituals, or how the Word invites us to go through and beyond the words to reach God. In a sense, the poem takes readers on a pilgrimage of words.

So my poetics run from AMDG to the various words/voices in which my poems become a ritual honoring God. Because they represent a multiplicity of meanings, words reflect our postlapsarian condition. But the Word is immutable. Aptly enough, I’m working on a book titled *In the Custody of Words* for an important series edited by David Craig at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio.

1. **4. This Religion Writer would be remiss to refuse your comment to me regarding your scholarly work, for as you say in that email about the questions: “We can talk about my role as editor and more than 30 books on Tennessee Williams, Shakespeare, contemporary African American drama, and a widely used business writing text *Successful Writing at Work*. Right now I am working on a book of poems on Emmett Till.” As interviewer, I am not sure where to begin with this subject, it is so large in your life and probably looms large in its influence on your poetry. What about the interplay of your scholarly work on Williams/Shakespeare and how that has influenced your sense of voice, dramatic situation, etc.**

I received my Ph.D. from Northwestern University writing a dissertation on Shakespeare and Elizabethan doctors and medicine. And for over 35 years I have taught and published on dramatic literature, including 8 books on Tennessee Williams, 5 on Shakespeare, and a few on African American playwrights Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks. My work on drama and

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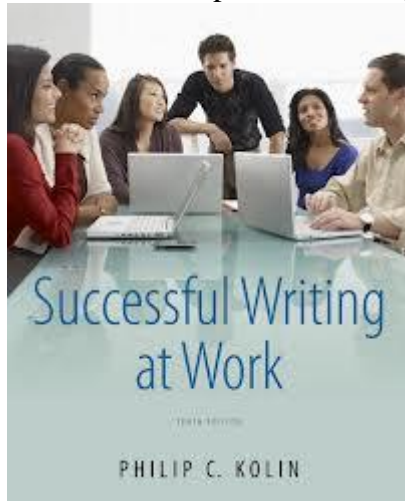
theatre certainly has conditioned the way I write poems. I try to be attuned to the voices, the conflicts, and the denouements within the poems. Reviewers have often pointed to the strong sense of dramatic setting and tensions in the poems. *A Parable of Women: Poems*, which was published in 2009, contains 23 poems on both Biblical and secular women—from the Blessed Mother to a homeless post-Katrina widow. There are also poems “delivered” by Hagar, Herodotus, and two nuns, one just entering the convent and the other praying during Adoration. Of all my poems, I suspect those in *Parable* most obviously reflect my teaching and research in drama. I tried to capture different female voices just as one would characters in a play. The poems in the collection could be described as a theatre of voices. But all my scholarly work has been a preamble of sorts, along with my Catholic upbringing, for the types of poetry I write. Of course, the most important book from which I have learned about voices and drama is the Bible.

You asked about my editing. Over the years I’ve edited 5 scholarly journals, and have served as the General Editor for the Routledge Shakespeare Criticism series for years. I have also published 10 editions of a business writing book titled *Successful Writing at Work* (Cengage/Wadsworth), and I always give God the praise for this work.

Right now I am the editor of the *Southern Quarterly* and *Vineyards: A Journal of Christian Poetry*. I founded *Vineyards* to give Christian poets a much needed space where they could share the fruits of their labors. Recall that at its most holy, the vineyard can be the sacred space inhabited by God (John 15:1). I love St. John. Later this year *Vineyards* will become an exclusively online journal allowing me to publish more poets who, like me, share a metaphysical vision of poetry. An editor’s job is to pay close attention to words, pruning, etc. No wonder I pay

close attention to words. I once wrote a 25-page essay on the word *paper* in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where there are so many verbal references to paper as image and prop. Paper was not only a means of expressing Blanche's delusions and vulnerability, but also Stanley's insistence and reliance on legal orders, the Napoleonic Code.

People are often surprised that Philip Kolin the Tennessee Williams or Shakespeare scholar or textbook author is also the poet. Over the years, I have received emails from individuals who



have used my *Successful Writing at Work* in their courses asking if I also am the one who published a poetry book. Conversely, people I have worked with who write or edit Christian poetry are amazed to learn I've spent such a large part of my career as a Williams and Shakespeare scholar. Ironically, I have never taken or taught a poetry writing course.

1. **One poet this Religion Writer interviewed told me writing poetry is an act of prayer. Is it so for you, and tell us something about what poetry is for you? Speak a little about how you got started, and importantly when you started editing a magazine of poetry containing the works of others. In it, what do you look for, and if readers want to see a copy, where do they get one? Is it a magazine of faith poetry? Talk to us about that magazine, and your work as an editor. In this long question, where we touch on editing, tell us something about your poetry style. As you yourself have framed it, tell us about, "...my techniques/style, my use of puns, slant lines, poetry as architecture." Can you give us an example of one or two?**

While God spoke the Word once and forever, we live in a world of words, some beautiful, some shattered. As I said earlier, we are in the custody of words. By our human nature we are bound to a plenitude of words. Hence my poems invite readers to worship the Word through the various meanings/levels words convey—see the various angles, the contexts where the Word enters our life. Many of my poems contain *double entendres* or even *triple entendres* to account for the way my readers, you or I go through the flux of time while, I hope, listening to God’s Word calling us into ritual. While, I hope, listening to God’s Word calling us into ritual. A wholly outrageous example comes at the end of “The Martha Within” (from *Reading God’s Handwriting*) where

God told her

He loved all those wrinkled

And sin-stained banquets

Others gave Him, and told her

To get cooking on hers.

I’m particularly eager to have readers see theology through the *double entendres* as well as through the architectural shapes of the poem, line and stanza breaks, short and long lines. I use enjambment, for instance, to envision the earthly/the flux trying to reach out to the eternal.

“Maranatha” from *Deep Wonder* includes the stanza:

I trust, Lord,

That you stroll

The more stormy seas

Of daily life

With their pitching cares

And doubts and cares

Keelhauling us

Until we

Squalling vessels

Are christened calm.

I hope readers can feel, metaphorically, the “pitching cares” rocking back and forth between the lines. And *christened*, of course, refers to being renamed in and by Christ who is above the storm. In another poem, “The River” from *Reading God’s Handwriting*, the last stanza reads:

A congregation of fireflies

Hang jasper lanterns

On the levees

For prayers to read.

Jasper can refer to the moonlight as well as the walls of heaven. The enjambment and length of the last two lines visually depicts how prayers reach into the dark night we all face at some time or another. The last poem in *Reading God’s Handwriting* is “Heaven” where

God greets you

He speaks only in vowels

He tells you about

Your new neighborhood

Infinity

Having a one line, or even one-word, stanza at the end of the poem opens the words of the poem into the Word who lives in infinity. Thus the one-Word line here suggests the vastness of an unending life with God. The Parousia!

Of course I have been inspired by Biblical language and so many of the poems in *Reading God’s Handwriting* pick up directly words whose sacred references energize the poems. I think the two best examples are the poems “Holiness Is” and “The Catechumens Recite Their Scrutinies.”

Sacramental words like *ephods*, *ouches*, *daysman*, rare and wonderful, I hope send readers back to the Word whose revealed truth is Scripture (the act of writing) and whose gift is Pentecost.

ADDENDUM



Philip Kolin at the University of Southern Mississippi

Figure 4 Philip Kolin at the University of Southern Mississippi

Christmas at St. Simon's Mission

By Philip Kolin

God's love is

Like the waves of the Gulf,

Waves followed by waves,

Until our eyes are washed to see

Them as endless gifts

Unwrapped in their scurrying

Explosions of ribbons and

Crumpled, frosty papers, bows
And every name tag ripped off,
No matter, just the spirit
Celebrates the day.

The men on homeless row
Roll in,
Waves of smoke, laughing,
Coughing, chewing tobacco,
Hiding their half pints
calling us into ritual.

In torn overcoats, chipped
Teeth showing.

They wear smiles in their lapels
And shift from one foot
To another,
And back again,
Rushing through a sea of syllables
Before the feast.

Mary's Aviary

By Philip Kolin

Mary surely kept birds

Her life is chronicled

In their singing—

Doves wooing at the beginning

Sparrows tearing afterwards.

Gabriel brought her more

Than smooth words soft as dawn

On his shoulders sat

The glory of the sky:

An indigo bunting

Wailing blues to the Queen.

In Baroque frescoes

Birds fan mother and child,

As escadrille of feathers and breezes

Giving the air color and the earth air.

Throughout Nazareth flocks

Of lauding hummingbirds

And vespering nightingales

Navigated the prophecies of her life.

The hour she ascended

Into a scrim of gentle clouds

The birds of this world flew into the east

Until they became like angels

Whose wings feast on fire.

Genesis

By Philip Kolin

a word, sanctified darkness hears, the light

shadows awake into gardens, ripe, fruit

ready, a man tastes names, wildflowers hum

nature, a lonely keeper, sleep fulfills

dreams, a woman's lips, smiles, questions,

apple trees everywhere, full of forever, sometimes

a sudden, raspy breeze, a voice outside a promise

woeful mouths, naked knowledge, poverty, gates

idols laugh, generations wander, folly fed with eyes

an old man's worried knife, a young boy's shining neck

covenants honored, rams, tomorrow's seeds, and stars,

always stars

Holiness Is

By Philip Kolin

dwelling with God in large places

being small

going darkly behind the curtain into

the Holy of Holies

ephods of light

anointed air

the sweet cinnamon and myrrh of God's perfume

ouches of gold and purple linen amidst voices of dust

incense of fatfleshed heifers & rams

wheat, the first fruits

men who gave birth through their knees

ascents to flaming mountains erupting

eternity aglow inside a furnace where three men sing

slaving under a pyramid

fleeing Egypt, always fleeing, idols and seraph serpents

the bloody lintels of firstborn shaped into

poles carrying a carnelian ark embedded with twelve stars,
twelve tribes
centuries of wandering, centuries of waiting
Under the terebinths, welcoming an angel's call,
a baby leaping toward the infinite,
a virgin's womb fulfilling the ancient prophecies,
pain and glory
the radiance of camel-hair shirts in the desert
& wild-honey prayers
the Word transfigured in a temple
teaching on parapets, on Sinai, on the brow of a hill
where God wept night at noon
feeding the hungry on unleavened hoarfrost,
on locusts, on quail, on bread broken in an upstairs room,
panis angelorum multiplied like those loaves and fish,
multiplying still inside spired tabernacles
lux mundi
the light of the world in this small pyx.

Lectio Divina

By Philip Kolin

In sapphire light they gather
And are gathered by God
An assembly of crows

Men hidden inside their souls
So the world cannot peer in
Eyes bright as pearls

They read about Him
In the tiny, curved places
Where God's ear is closest

His voice clearest
In the serifs, parentheses,
Apostrophes, the calligraphy

Of creation and apocalypse both,
Light and wounds
The one in the other when

The Word enters in silence.
They have become adjectives
Seeking the only noun that counts.

The Catechumens Recite Their Scrutinies-Poem

By Philip Kolin

I.

We are parched, Lord,
To this world of soiled rain
Our tears turn to dust.
Who will see them before
They blow away?
Our tongues are rudderless
Without a stream of living words
We are voiceless voices.
Briars, nettles, and proud thorns sprout
In the wilderness of our mouths.
We have eaten ashes like bread.
Our brows are barren.
We write our sins on sandpaper
To smooth out the dry, rough edges
Of our conscience.

II.

We are lost in the dense darkness of self
Confusing the space of a coffin with
The size of a galaxy.
Whoever owns a candle, owns our world

For a small hour.

But ours is not a holy darkness.

The curtained shelter of a cowl or closet.

When will the stone be rolled

Away from our eyes? Stripped of light

We perform a pantomime of perfection.

We long to wear the livery of your sight.

III.

Be our daysman.

Fix the time our exile ends.

Call us from high gallery or side door,

Or from the darkness without.

Let us stand stripped in bare sackcloth

On sheepskin in the nave.

Extending our hands like sore-swept beggars to you

The hirelings, the prosecutors of mercy.

With chrism sanctify us between

Our shoulder blades and on our heads pour

Pure snow water, the color of grace.

Then invest us in linen, with dangling red sashes,

So you can catch us, quick or dead,

Lest we fall again.

Mary's Covenant

By Philip Kolin

In Nazareth a young
Milkmaid so graced
With a fruitful heart
Said Yes in a
World accustomed to no

But did not
While she did.

Her knowledge placed
The world at the end
Of God's love
The farthest reach
Of his hand made
Into earth.

Her Yes was heard
Across the centuries

And the galaxies
It was the sign above
The cross of love.

O Mary conceived
In the heart of the Father
And espoused by the Spirit
Cradle your Son tonight
In a world aborting life
In the middle of love.

Before time started
Its pace through
The vale of tears
Mary's Yes echoed
The plans of Architect God's
Creation. She is

The mater for His troweling
Sky, moon, and sun

The Father's favorite Daughter on earth
Carried a basket

Of crosses
Laced with honey
Perfume and pain.

The fruit from Mary's
Garden filled a universe
With stars, for Christ, twinkling
The paths for
Wisemen and willing virgins
Husbands who sleep with
Their wives in Christ
Sarah, Ruth, Gomer, Elizabeth,
All wait for—
The Messiah
She conceived
In her basket
Decorated with
Royal arcs,
Ribbons blue.

See now
Today Christ
Descending into

Mary

Christmas.

ADDENDUM II

Seeking the Sacred

Diane Scharper | DECEMBER 17, 2012

Reading God's Handwriting: Poems

Philip C. Kolin. Kaufmann. 122p, \$16.95

Philip C. Kolin, author of *Reading God's Handwriting*, and Paul Mariani, of *Epitaphs for the Journey*, are Roman Catholic poets who allow their beliefs to infuse their poetry. They are also intellectuals who avoid the cloying quality found in some religious verse. Their best poems have a mystical—almost sacramental—quality and seem reminiscent of works by Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.

In *Reading...*, Philip Kolin examines those moments when the divine becomes apparent—to paraphrase the introduction. Getting inside his subjects, Kolin speaks for them almost as a medium. He writes in free verse, loading his lines with arresting metaphors, as in “God’s syllables so sacred/ Greek and Latin need a shawl/ Just to hold them, vowels,/ subduing the clamor of consonants.” (“Holy Communion”). Although there are a few poems about contemporary life, most of the book has a religious context.

Many of the poems achieve their effect through the use of synesthesia (“a man tastes names,” “Genesis”). Many are also written as lists that build to a resonating moment. Take “On His Comfort.” Musing on God’s concern for mankind, the poem is awash in alliteration (a Hopkins trademark) as it enumerates the ways God has aided his people. The poem’s final stanza is powerfully evocative: “To Lazarus he says take up your corpse/ And taste the light. His tears fill twelve/ stone water jars. He raises a daughter/ Coiled in death. Talithacumi, he whispers./ Little one, rise.” The metaphor, “coiled in death,” seems especially apt.

Editor of *Vineyards: A Journal of Christian Poetry*, Kolin asks poets to submit “carefully crafted poetry that is grounded in Christian belief and that ...rises above the expected or clichéd....” He seeks authentic poetry “that displays the technical mastery and creative fervor” found in highly regarded secular journals...

Diane Scharper, a member of the National Book Critics Circle, reviews poetry for Library Journal and other publications. She is the author of several books including Radiant: Prayer/Poems (Cathedral Foundation Press).

This excerpt is reprinted by permission of the author. The full review originally appears *America Magazine*.

ADDENDUM IV

In a brief phone conversation with the publisher of the work *Reading God's Handwriting: Poems*, Leslie Kaufmann said regarding the poet: **He was recommended by author Joseph Pearce, Thomas More College of Liberal Arts, Merrimack, New Hampshire) biographer of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He sent me a glowing letter and a sample of Philip's work. I found I could not agree with Joseph more. It was extraordinary.**

It is understood that the house of Kaufmann Publishing is not well-known. The publisher says of this matter: **Most people don't know about the publishing house. I find hard to mix promotion and distribution, my weak areas, with producing books.** But I'm working on it.



Publisher Leslie Kaufmann at home

She offers regarding her own sense of publishing that hers is a...**Roman Catholic list with four priests three Catholic and one Episcopalian, several teachers/professors. There are ten poetry books and a few of prose. I started out publishing books in 2005 with a background in print/design. I've had to depend on God for things I've needed. That's the truth of it.** Her own religious life in worship is lived out at **St. William Catholic Church in Savannah Diocese.** End of notes of a phone conversation with small publisher.



Home of Kaufmann Publishing

ADDENDUM IV

Initial set of questions asked of the publisher Leslie Kaufmann:

1. **Given the opportunity to talk with you regarding your publishing house and your work as a publisher, especially in light of your publishing Philip C. Kolin's work, *Reading God's Handwriting: Poems*, I want to know something about the making of the decision and reasons for taking on that work. Also, do you find that Kaufmann Publishing has other similar works, even of a religious kind, that you want to talk a little bit about?**

1. **2. What led you to go into the publishing business? It is something of a mystery to readers to unveil some of the reasons someone cares enough about poetry and writing, as you must for your house publishes poetry only, to offer books to readers? Is the fact you are a woman influential in your choices, if you think so or not? Tell readers something of your own work as a publisher, that is what you do, and how you generally came to start your house? What keeps you going?**

1. **3. What of your own background in the literary world. We all believe that publishers are engaged in a world of ideas, to a greater extent than not. What are some of the ideas in the books you've published and in your own life that move you most, and keep you going? What do you admire in another house? If someone were to say, not just in a sound bite, but in more words and ways than that, this is what Kaufmann Publishing and its list is about, what couple of things might they say or have observed?**

1. **4. Can you take a few minutes to speak of anything I may have missed in this area, or what you want to say in this interview that has been missed? That includes telling us some about a new work you will offer, or something about publicity or other tour making the rounds of any work on your list. Even tell us some more about one or two other of your writers, or of any writer?**

Interview: Robert Siegel, poet of Maine USA speaks with the writer on his work—another in the ongoing series of conversations with Anglican and Christian poets



Robert & Ann on 45th Anniversary Trip to Italy

This writer says as note, I have been thinking about how to make the Eucharist a Christmas 2011 statement, and also to introduce the article-interview with Maine poet Robert H. Siegel about his work which is a gift. [Certainly, Christ's birth is a gift to mankind—as is the Eucharist. In a manner, so is the gift of poetry a kind of birth in the poet's life, as the poem does take on a life of its own after its "birth." A poem requires nurture.]

The interview with Robert Siegel was conducted by email, and questions were answered in writing by the poet.

The following quote displays his poem about finches, and was one inspiration for the title of his book, "A Pentecost of Finches: New & Selected Poems..." It is from the Houghton College interview conducted by John Leax and noted as partial reprint later in this article.

Matins

By Robert Siegel

It is morning. A finch startles
the maple leaves. Everything's clear
in this first light before all thins
to a locust harping on the heat.

While day clutches at my pulse
to inject the usual anesthetic,
now, Christ, stimulate my heart,
transfuse your blood to fortify my own.

Let no light upon these sheets
diminish, Lord, before I feel you
burst inward like a finch
to nest and sing within this tree of bones.

INTRODUCTION

For my way of thinking, the work of a poet is the result of a gift. This is especially true of Robert Siegel of Maine, USA ; he is a man with a gift. He is also a man who writes poetry that reflects his faith while writing about animals and God's other creatures in a way that a naturalist can love.

This article-interview on Robert Siegel is another in the ongoing series of interviews with Anglican and Christian poets. The poet wrote in an email:

You asked about a person, or persons, who know my work. On my website (robert-siegel.com) I've included six complete reviews of my last two books of poetry. You might want to look at Paul Willis' review in *Christianity and Literature*, as he touches on the relationship of poetry to faith and the spiritual. So does Thomas Bontly in *The Sewanee Review*. Robert French in *The North Dakota Quarterly* comments on my animal poems, which I consider my most characteristic, and (it seems to me) gets at what I'm trying to do in these and others.

I was raised Presbyterian but I have been an Anglican for 49 years this November, having been inspired to change by C.S. Lewis (and by my lovely wife, who preceded me into the fold).

Robert

POET PAUL WILLIS' REVIEW, IN PART

Here is part of one review of Robert Siegel's book, "A Pentecost of Finches: New & Selected poems," Paraclete Press (Brewster, Massachusetts) from his website.

Professor of English and poet at [Westmont College](#), Santa Barbara, [Paul Willis](#) wrote:

Sometimes Siegel ventures into the realm of specifically biblical creatures, to fine effect.

In "A Colt, the Foal of an Ass" from the selected portion, the beast of burden reflects on "this moment of bearing the man, / a weight that is light and easy" (118). "The Serpent Speaks" which concludes the first part of the new poems, is perhaps the greatest achievement of the collection. This long, sinuous monologue tempts us all over again—"I am another vine"—even as it rehearses the infection of all of history and

the inevitable diminishment of the diabolical speaker (28). And yet the serpent is always a serpent, slithering side by side with the other natural snakes in this volume, all exquisitely observed.

To continue with a long quotation from the review written 2009, and appearing on the poet's web page [here](#), the review goes on in detail:



Professor Paul Willis

... I want to hasten to point out other glories of this collection. Prominent among them are the portraits of New Testament characters that comprise the second part of the new poems. These rough sonnets crystallize the inner lives of a whole array of individuals. Take, for example, “Perfection,” on Mary Magdalene, whose flask of perfume has been brought from Egypt by a Roman general and given to her with the command, “Never age.... / Stay perfect. This will help” (37). Or “Judas” who confides to us, “All along I was the only one who seemed to know / what the Man could do if he put his mind to it” (41). Or “The Epicure” who enjoys

...a pleasant life: at night the temple girls,
occasionally, after lunch, the flute-playing boy.
A moderate life: poetry for the heart and prose
to temper the mind, though I found less and less joy
in it....

Then, one day, happening to hear in the agora “one speak of a strange god,” suddenly he “heard Pythagoras’ // golden spheres turn for a second” (46).

It is the turning of these golden spheres that points to Siegel’s abilities and aspirations as a poet. His way of seeing is not merely sacramental but ultimately mystical. In “Annunciation,” he marks the coming of Gabriel in the most homely and heavenly of ways:

Things grew brighter, more distinct, themselves,
in a way beyond explaining. This was her home,
yet somehow things grew more homelike. Jars on the shelves
gleamed sharply: tomatoes, peaches, even the crumbs
on the table grew heavy with meaning and a sure repose
as if they were forever. (34)

Likewise, in “Patmos,” Siegel records the vision of John, “now in the blaze of noon and when the stars sang to his eyes” (47).

This anagogic impulse is sustained in poems throughout the volume. Part three of the new poems begins with the shaped stanzas of “Peonies”: “we see in them absolute / fire at the center, stasis / of star’s core...” (51). They are as “Dante saw the stars in a glass, / a corolla of souls, / each reflecting / the other’s light / and charity...” (51-52). Not surprisingly, another poem in this section is titled “Traherne,” a tribute to and imitation of that supremely mystical seventeenth-century English poet. Siegel glosses him when he writes, “The smallest grain of wheat would light the ground...” (60). The very last poem in the volume, “Voice of Many Waters,” with an epigraph from Revelation and a dedication to Clyde Kilby, is reminiscent of Traherne as well. First to last, in poems that span perhaps forty years, Siegel has stayed wondrously true to this vision.

INTERVIEW BY EMAIL WITH JOHN LEAX RE ROBERT SIEGEL

John Leax: I was a student of Clyde Kilby at Wheaton in the early sixties. I believe he first told me about Robert Siegel, holding him up as something of a model for me, one of the times we talked about my ambition to be a poet. Bob, with his degree from the Hopkins Writing Seminars and PhD from Harvard, I agreed was worth emulating, but I couldn’t imagine myself following that path. I was too much an indifferent student to achieve on that level.



About ten years later, after I’d gone to the Hopkins Writing Seminars (but not Harvard or any other PhD) and had begun teaching I finally met Bob at a conference on teaching creative writing sponsored by the Library of Congress. I believe Mel

Lorentzen, a former teacher of both of us from Wheaton, introduced us. Bob, who was sitting with Richard Eberhart, was very polite. I was a bit in awe, somewhat tongue-tied, and awkward. What contact we had following that conference I can't remember.

In 1980 or early 1981 I invited Bob to visit Houghton where I was teaching. I think our friendship really began then. I was editing a small magazine then and interviewed Bob for it. (I'll arrange to have it scanned and emailed to you tomorrow.) A couple years later when the group of writers that would become the Chrysostom society met at New Harmony, I was included at Bob's invitation. (He had written an introduction to my first book of prose that had just appeared.) Our friendship, encouraged by yearly visits and the shared concerns of the society, grew from that time. I may have been on the board at the same time as Bob, I can't remember.



For the last ten years, we have been working together with Jeane Murray Walker on a collaborative poem on the seven deadly sins. The idea for this came from Bob and was worked on while hiking along the gorge in Letchworth State Park. This work has overflowed the boundary of the literary project and infiltrated my life. If I was in awe when I first met Bob, I am now deeply humbled by his craft, learning, wisdom, and generosity. In a strange way, largely because of my personality, our friendship while warm remains a bit formal. I still regard Bob with a bit of awe and can't imagine imposing myself on him. (I know his character is such that he would find that sentence impossible.)

One thing that should be added: If one walks into a room filled with laughter at the Chrysostom Society, most likely Bob Siegel and Richard Foster are at the center of it. Somewhere in the archives is a collection of “roasting” limericks exchanged between them and others (often Luci Shaw) over dinner.

Jack



Robert and two of four grandchildren, photo by Ann Siegel

INTERVIEW WITH MAINE POET ROBERT SIEGEL

Peter Menkin: Take us down the road a little on the journey of the poet. By this I mean, what is it that the ear is tuned to, and the eye wanting to see, and the heart moved by when it comes to the life of a poet and the work of poetry in one’s life.

Robert Siegel: Even before I could read I enjoyed the sound, rhythm, and texture of words in nursery rhymes like the following:

Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes

She shall have music wherever she goes.

Later I played with words on signs and billboards while riding in a car. *Gulf Gas* spelled backwards created the abysmal monster *Flug Sag*, and *Standard Oil* became *Dradnats Lio* a mythical half dragon and half lion. I wrote occasional rhymes As a sophomore in high school Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* inspired a somber sixteen-line poem called "Anthony's Revenge" that began, "My grief it knows no fathom, my wrath it knows no end," It impressed my teacher, but chiefly I wrote poems as an adolescent to impress and woo the girl who is now my wife of 50 years.

In my college freshman comp. course I wrote a love lyric that came out of nowhere one lunch hour. The professor liked it well enough to read to the class and suggested I enter it in a contest. After that I was hooked. I took a couple of creative writing courses and every literature course I could find, and in my junior year started gathering weekly to workshop poems with other students, some of us bringing in three or four poems every week. We called it the Poets' Corner, after that corner of Westminster Abbey.

During that time there was a definite moment when I felt called to a life as a poet. It happened in the fall of my senior year. I was in the Morton Arboretum looking at a spectacular array of fall foliage, when I rounded a corner and stopped in awe of a brilliant red tree—a crabapple, perhaps, or a Japanese maple. As I looked at its intensely red leaves they mesmerized me, as if they were on fire. And yet they were still, as if I'd stepped out of time. In that moment the thought came to me: "So this is Beauty and I am called to reveal it to the world." It was very distinct, and after that I knew clearly what my poetry was for. It had the force of a religious vocation.

After that it was inevitable I'd apply to the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. After taking the master's degree, and a year's teaching in Chicago, I enrolled in Harvard's graduate school—partly because the poet Robert Lowell was there. I had read his

early poetry, such as his elegy, *The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket*. Lowell was a great inspiration and I worked with him my four years there. His approval confirmed my vocation. Early in my first term there I went to his office hours with nine poems I had written that fall. I found him alone, and had an hour and a half with him before another student showed up. I handed him one poem after another. After reading a few he said to me. "Other people have played this trick of handing me one poem to read and then another and another, but this is the first time I've looked forward to the next." Obviously these words burned themselves into my brain, along with other very encouraging comments. Each fall from 1963 to 67 I attended his morning office hours, which by the second year had turned into an informal seminar. He urged me to send out poems and liked particularly my poem "Hanscom Air Field" so well he carried it to Robert Manning, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, where it appeared in June of '67. Later he recommended to the publisher my first book, *The Beasts & the Elders*..

Peter Menkin: You have also been a teacher for many years. Some schools where you taught are these: *Siegel has taught at Dartmouth, Princeton, and Goethe University in Frankfurt, and for twenty-three years at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he directed the graduate creative writing program and is currently professor emeritus of English. He has degrees from Wheaton, Johns Hopkins, and Harvard. He is married to Ann Hill Siegel, a photographer, and lives on the coast of Maine.* So your website tells its readers. Is there a similarity to the work of teacher to that of poet? Or more, does being a teacher feed your poetry, and sense of the poetic?

Robert Siegel: I feel very privileged to have taught. Not only did teaching provide the time for writing, but it meant that I was always working with literature and with students



who were learning to write poetry or fiction.. It was wonderful to have the chance to teach *Paradise Lost*, *King Lear*, and *Heart of Darkness* to Dartmouth freshmen, Coleridge to seniors, and, later, Yeats to graduate students.

We were particularly fortunate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to have a large graduate program in creative writing with students in their twenties to mid-seventies. Not only did this mean we had mature students, but also ones with some life experience to write about. I

had one lady in her seventies who had survived Hitler's camps—though much of her family didn't—and ultimately published two books of poetry about it.

I think writing and teaching draw upon the same energy, for I did not write as much during term time. But teaching a subject helps you to continue learning it, and you learn in various ways from students. For instance, I think the critiquing of student poetry in seminars no doubt sharpened my ability to revise my own work.

One thing I learned while teaching in our graduate program in an urban university is how much talent there is out there, and how many people with talent fail to fully develop it—often for understandable reasons. This has always seemed to me to hint at the reality of an afterlife—there is so much more to people than can be fully discovered and developed in one lifetime.

Peter Menkin: I think people believe the poet is like the philosopher, like the teacher, like the musician—also the painter. In essence, the poet is a writer. Will you tell us if you agree with these statements and talk a little about your own work, especially that of the religious and faith kind. Does it either increase for you and even others food for thought about the Almighty and his Son Jesus Christ? Do you think that there is a sense of the grandeur of life and that of the Almighty? If so, how and even why? I know these are pointed questions, especially regarding religion and God, but my work as a Religion Writer sometimes asks I talk about such things with people. I am hoping you will take some time and talk to us about such things.

Robert Siegel: Yes, there is a connection between the poet, the musician, and the philosopher. Also the painter. I particularly identify with the painter in the use of imagery. We have several artists in the family, including my wife, a truly gifted photographer. Walter Pater said poetry aspires to the condition of music, and music is certainly of the essence too. Pound said that in addition to visual imagery and music, poetry had to have substantive meaning (I think the exotic term he used for this was *logopoeia*) which certainly connects it to philosophy.

For me that meaning is ultimately spiritual. Charles Williams said somewhere there are four sources of natural revelation: Love, Art, Nature, and the City. I've never related well to cities but the other three have been the source of poetry for me and means of apprehending and expressing my spiritual convictions, however indirectly.

In college I was fortunate in my English major to take courses in the major poets, Chaucer, Spenser, Wordsworth, Blake, Keats, Coleridge, and Shelley and Hopkins, and Eliot. to mention some of my favorites. They presented love, poetry and nature to me as sources of the divine. I will talk more about romantic love later. But I'll quote here two lines from Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" that struck me my freshman year in college:

What is this world, what asketh man to have,

Now in his love's armes, now in his colde grave.

As for nature, they—even T.S. Eliot—found “splendor in the grass and glory in the flower,” as Wordsworth put it, and shared in various ways a neo-platonic view of the world where everything is capable of revealing the divine, no matter how lowly it is on the great chain of being. Hopkins called this *inscape*, and he found it in everything from an eyelash to a wave of the sea. Poetry then became for me a possible sacramental, a way of *final participation* in Owen Barfield’s sense, of “finding the presence of God in everything,” or in Browning’s “God is seen God, / In the star in the stone in the flesh in the soul and the clod.”

The experience of a calling I referred to earlier helped me to understand this. And before that, a conversion experience I had in college where God revealed His reality to me. Immediately afterwards I transferred to Wheaton College, a strong, non-denominational Christian institution, where I knew my faith could be nurtured and I might grow in Christ. There I encountered C.S. Lewis’s works and was confirmed in the Anglican Church. In the last decade I have started regular centering prayer, according to the method taught by Father Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk, and find this contemplative method has certain qualities suggestive of the act of writing.



Monk and hermit, Father Bruno Barnhart, Camaldolese Benedictine

In turn the act of writing poetry becomes for me a kind of sacramental experience. Bruno Barnhart, a **Camaldolese hermit**, says that the “unitive” aesthetic experience offered by literature and art—when we feel one with what we are reading, looking at, or hearing—is a step toward experiencing union with God and I would agree. Our best experiences with literature and the arts are contemplative, a union of ourselves with the beauty before us. Literature and the arts can help us to forget ourselves and experience a completeness, a wholeness, for a moment or an hour. We forget our incomplete, divided selves and for a time are made one with what we are contemplating. This unitive experience can lead us to see beyond the work of art itself to what may shine through it, the world of the spirit.

This unitive experience may often lead me to write a poem. As I’ve described it elsewhere: “Most of us [writers] share a desire to call up things into words. This is the alchemy

that fascinates me. A sensation, impression, or image will step out from its surroundings and demand my total attention. the thing itself will appear to rise up as words and send me fumbling for my notebook or keyboard.. Here is the wonder of what Keats called ‘natural magic’ as the image reaches up toward the words, the words become the image, the thing itself. For one happy moment they are fused. Thing becomes word and word becomes thing. . . substance and meaning are fused. The terrible gap between experience and the articulation of experience is closed. The mind is one with what it perceives.”

In my animal poems, especially, I attempt to become one with the animal while remaining my human self, and thus, I hope to create a third thing or voice, which is something like a totemic presence. The act of becoming one with something as you contemplate it or write is what Keats named “negative capability.” Much of his poetry comes from this experience. He once commented that if “a sparrow comes before my window I take part in its existence and peck about the gravel.”

Here are several examples of what I do in the animal poems. In each case I’m quoting a short part of the poem (all from *A Pentecost of Finches: New & Selected Poems*. Copyright 2006, Robert Siegel. All rights reserved.):

from Deer Tick:

No larger than a period I scramble
among the sequoia of your armhairs
unable to decide in this vast wilderness
where to drill for the life-giving well,
the water of life, the warm blood.
For I am sick unto death: in my abdomen

the spirochete turns its deadly corkscrew
which I must shortly confess to the stream
pulsing from your dark red heart,
setting at liberty this ghostly germ

large in the deer's glazed eye
and the mouse's tremble. . . .

from Inchworm:

I am of two minds moving out of sync—
when one's in action, the other's resting,
and so I never come to a conclusion
though we move in the same direction
by separate steps, by little omegas,
yet neither end comes ever to an end. . . .

from Mussel:

I am
tasting the ocean
one mouthful at a time.

It is a slow rumination,
a reading of incunabula

in my cloister,

in this cell where light

fills me totally like an eye

then washes away. . . .

Slug

White, moist, orange,

I crawl up the cabbage leaf exposed,

too much like your most intimate parts

to be lovely, to be loved. I weep to the world,

my trail a long tear, defenseless

from its beaks and claws

except for my bitter aftertaste.

He who touches me shares my sorrow

and shudders to the innermost—my pale horns

reaching helpless into the future.

In plastic cups filled with beer

ringed like fortresses around your garden,

your lie of plenty,

we drown by the hundreds,

curled rigid in those amber depths,

so many parentheses surrounding nothing.

You do not understand nothing:

the nakedness to the sky,

the lack of one protective shelter,

the constant journey.

Millions of us wither in the margins

while food rots close by.

Nothing is a light that surrounds us

like the breath of God.

Peter Menkin: All of us who are fortunate enough have been exposed and even edified by the words of our teachings, what they teach, and even their presence in our lives. This writer is curious to know what you found in your own education that was special, and who among the teachers are remembered by you well. Tell us something of one or two of them, where they taught, and what as presence they meant to you.

Robert Siegel: I've been fortunate in the number of good teachers I've had. I even exchanged Christmas cards with my kindergarten teacher for a number of years, and, as I recall, had a crush on my second grade teacher. Three who were indeed special include Eloise Bradley Fink, a poet in her own right, who was my language arts teacher in eighth grade. She encouraged my writing. One day she sent the class out into the field next to our school to "hunt metaphor." Recently I came across a copy of what members came up with and was surprised how good they were. My own creation was quite forgettable. But over the years Eloise and her husband John supported my writing and we stayed in touch each year until a month before her death last spring.

A second was Professor Merle Brown at Denison, where I began as a freshman. I had him for lit classes for three semesters and he exemplified and taught us intellectual passion. I can still see him coming to class from the library, lost in thought, his brief case dangling from one arm, while he ambled along staring at the ground, deep in thought. He would give us a poem or section of prose, and mention three or four critical theories about it, then invite our own theories—often pausing and silently thinking while leading the discussion, his face marvelously expressive. I remember one afternoon when discussing Spenser I felt I had been translated into another world,

what I can only describe as filled with something like platonic Ideas. They were almost physical—radiant and tactile, and we were all participating in a great dance of thought.

A third teacher I must mention is Professor Clyde Kilby at Wheaton, the man who founded the Wade Collection of the Inklings: C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, Charles Williams, Dorothy Sayers, Owen Barfield and others. Besides his enthusiasm for literature—especially the Romantic poets and the Inklings—he conveyed a greatness of soul. Literature was very much involved with life and his living faith and his love for students. You could drop into his office any afternoon—or his home on campus—and he would make you feel as if to him you were the most important person in the world at that moment. His wife Martha did the same; they entertained students in their home all the time. I can still hear his infectious laugh, as he told us how his grandmother used to sneak out of her bedroom onto the porch roof to read Byron, as her father had refused to have Byron's poems under his roof. He was a lovely man, a man radiant with love.

And I'd like to mention Beatrice Batson, who taught Milton, Donne, Herbert, and Shakespeare with great love for them, and Helen Siml Devette, who inspired and taught poetry and fiction writing and brought cookies to the Poets' Corner.

In graduate school, the great influence was Robert Lowell.

Peter Menkin: Okay. Let us broaden this issue of questions a little outside the boundaries of you as poet, to that of your wife. People are fascinated, frequently, by the life of the poet. It is considered special, gifted, and even a little odd. Talk to us about marriage, and tell us about your wife and how she lives with, helps, and maybe inspires you as poet. Do you think that this kind of married life has helped you with your work, enriched your life, found another way to love and responsibility and meaning that is reflected in either your life or work outside the time together in the home? Tough question, but certainly a question that says we do not live alone, and that one's spouse is a great influence and part of each member of the married couple's life.

Robert Siegel : Dante, when he at long last sees Beatrice again in the *Paradiso*, comments (to paraphrase) that from the first day he saw her face in this life, up to this present sight, he never failed to follow her step by step in his poetry. For Charles Williams, Dante's quest for Beatrice was the prime example of how romantic love may lead to divine love. And as Beatrice led Dante to Paradise and beyond in *the Divine Comedy*, so did love for the lady who became my wife help move me, I believe, toward a higher, spiritual love. I try to express this in a poem "After Viewing the Bust of Nefertiti," addressed to Ann:

Whether stooping among your flowers

or in more meditative hours.

the cup moving toward you at the rail,
a likeness of you will only fail
to reveal the *je ne sais quoi* that
grows where flesh leaves off—a light
Raphael released from paper, yet
beyond words startled into flight
by this poor pen—the shadow of one
who thought of you before the sun
was kindled, yet precisely here
and for this moment made you the dear
image of that beauty and grace
who loves us with a human face.



Ann

I told a classmate when engaged to Ann that I thought she was an angel sent to keep me on the right path. After 50 years of marriage I would still agree with that. (Interestingly, Wordsworth's poem about his wife describes her as he first saw her, "a phantom of delight", but later as "a woman too" though one with "something of angelic light.") Our common faith, our belief that our marriage includes God and has been blessed by Him, has helped all the way along. Marriage to Ann has provided love, companionship, and stability. Our temperaments complement each other well; and our metabolisms match (for instance, we both like to sleep about the same number of hours). We share a number of interests, from hiking and camping and reading to a love of nature in photography and poetry. Ann has been able to pursue her photography more ardently since we retired and is hanging it in juried shows.

We have three beautiful daughters, Lenaye, Lucy, and Christine, all now in their forties. They've given us four grandchildren, ages 9 to 12. Two of our three daughters live in Maine and they and the four grandchildren visit frequently. They help keep us alert and involved with all stages of life.

Besides all this, I must say that Ann has a sweet and happy disposition, and is thoughtful and warm with people, putting them at their ease. People are drawn to her. (We have been active in various church groups over the years where this is especially evident.) We rarely argue very long about anything, though we may have differing views. We're glad that we virtually grew up in the same town and knew each other as early as sixteen, which means we've developed interests and attitudes together. Our home life is tranquil, and for this I credit Ann's abundant good nature.

Peter Menkin: Before getting to the sixth and final question, I've asked this kind of question of the different poets I've talked to about their work. Please give us some advice for the young poet, the young person on their own development and work as poet. What does the high school age, or the college age man or woman begin to consider when starting out as poet? But mostly, feel free to tell us what you would or do tell them of poetry and being a poet.

Robert Siegel: What would I tell young poets just starting out? Well, a number of things, as I did, and still do, in seminars or workshops.

Perhaps the most important thing I have to say is that the best reward for writing poetry is the act of writing itself. You should love it, including the revising, which can be frustrating at times. I love to tinker with] poems I may have been working with over years. Remember, you'll probably spend nine hours revising for every hour spent in original composition.

The second greatest reward is to receive a response from a reader who understands what you are trying to do—in a review or a letter usually.

Everything else—prizes, positions, fellowships, the modest fame that poetry affords—are secondary to those first two things. When thing are going well with my writing, I feel I'm doing what I was made to do and that I'm right where I should be—in the center of the universe.

Other advice:

Read, read, read!—all the great poets of the past as well as your contemporaries. Don't read just the current work. But do find a few contemporaries whose work you really like. You'll probably find yourself imitating them unconsciously. When that occurs, trying writing a few *deliberate* imitations. That way you'll be conscious of their stylistic features and can stop yourself from sounding too much like them. Gradually your own voice (or voices) will emerge.+

Write every day! even if it's just for a short time. And carry a small notebook around to write things in when away from a desk. (Theodore Roethke collected words and phrases in a notebook and then sometimes built poems out of them as if he were making a mosaic.)

Don't worry about a message. If you write the best sonnet or story you can, your deepest convictions will come out unconsciously in your work.

Be concrete in your writing, prose or poetry. Appeal to the five senses. This is something we can continue to learn all our lives. As Pound said, “Go in fear of abstractions.” Good writing relies on strong verbs and nouns. Don’t over-adjective and be especially cautious with adverbs.

Don’t give up your day job. The famous William Carlos Williams delivered several thousand babies in his career as a doctor, writing a number of his poems on a prescription pad while waiting for his patient in labor. Wallace Stevens wrote poems in his head while walking to his job in an insurance company

.Don’t expect to make money from selling poetry. If you want to make money writing, focus on non-fiction and fiction. Most poetry books sell from 500 to 3000 copies and don’t make significant returns for the publisher or the author. Poets usually make their livings teaching, editing or at any number of other occupations They may also make something giving readings and lectures, or from grants and prizes. Robert Frost claimed he made significant royalties from only one book, published in his eighties, and that was because he’d read from it at Kennedy’s inauguration.

Peter Menkin: Here we come to the end of our conversation, which I’ve enjoyed much. I am glad to make your acquaintance this way, and hope readers have found this dialogue in questions to their liking. Is there anything you want to add, anything I have missed, anything you would like to say on whatever comes to mind at this time that’s not been touched on, yet.



Robert Siegel: As I wrote in my introduction to *A Syllable of Water*, “Writing that appeals to the senses is more than vivid and memorable. For those of us who are Christians, it is incarnational. As in Christ the Word became flesh, so we hope our own best words become

flesh. We trust they will incarnate the beauty, terror, and glory of this world even while they lift the reader's gaze in hope beyond it. For we believe the incarnate Word, or Logos, of God is the transcendent element in every word.

The imagination can be a powerful key to the spiritual. Words, images, and music can catapult us beyond words, images, and music. The unitive experience of esthetic contemplation can be a stepping stone to contemplative prayer—but a stepping stone, not a stopping place. There is a real, spiritual world out there, more real than this we love so dearly, and poetry, art, and music can help us discover it.

Annunciation

She didn't notice at first the air had changed.

She didn't, because she had no expectation

Except the moment and what she was doing, absorbed

In it without the slightest reservation.

Things grew brighter, more distinct, themselves,

In a way beyond explaining. This was her home,

Yet somehow things grew more homelike. Jars on the shelves

Gleamed sharply: tomatoes, peaches, even the crumbs

On the table grew heavy with meaning and a sure repose

As if they were forever. When at last she saw

From the corner of her eye the gold fringe of his robe

She felt no fear, only a glad awe,

The Word already deep inside her as she replied,

Yes to that she'd chosen all her life.

Going On

Once I am sure there's nothing going on

I step inside. . . –Philip Larkin, "Church Going"

Once I am sure that something's going on
I enter, tired of mere ritual,
of liturgy where no work is done,
of punctual repetitions. One can tell
by the face and gestures of the celebrant—
or, better, by the others celebrating
this continually renewed act
of grace (invisible except where a look can't
hide the intimate and present fact).

I go forward, even though mostly summer

is sitting, damp and musty, in the pews,
to where a few in the mid-week evening glimmer
raise hands standing, while others move
to kneel where the priest lays hands on them,
often saying words better than he knows
to say. There I stay until the end
of the service—once more hear the strong love
commending me to eat that I might live.

And so I do. This church's architecture
is nothing special. There are few monuments
or memorials present here.

Only the window in the sanctuary has yet
embraced stained glass. The walls are bare.
What happens here is rarely to be discovered
in anything but the people—well- or ill-favored,
oppressed by poverty, by wealth, by having spent
themselves to no purpose. None is good,

in our first understanding of that word. All come
with a sense, dim or clear, that what they amount to fails,
the intelligence that tirelessly adds up the sum
of things in a clear system, sparks, falters,

shorts out—leaving us to press the mystery
against the roof of the mouth, to hug the ghost
once fused with flesh and still enfleshed in us,
until our spirit answers *Abba* and we know
by living contact what we can't deduce.

It is in the faces, and these come and go
like the spirit, which wanders where it will.
Even Canterbury's merely a heap of stones
until the spirit enters there and wells
in living voices, and thirty bishops dance
gravely to a voice beyond the chancel's.
Let no elegy hang here like the ghost of incense.
Rather, let walls tumble, altars grow wild—new
ones will be raised up in three days (or less)
of the sort the living spirit passes through.

(Note: The dance of bishops occurred spontaneously

in Canterbury Cathedral a few years ago.)

Peonies

In June these

globes of white flame

swell, explosions so very

slow, we see in them absolute

fire at the center, stasis

of star's core,

or a fragile

moonglow distilled

ghostly in each alembic.

From their green ambush these

unearthly aliens assault

us with color

for a week

then gradually fade

into another dimension. As

Dante saw the stars in a glass,

a corolla of souls,

each reflecting

the other's light

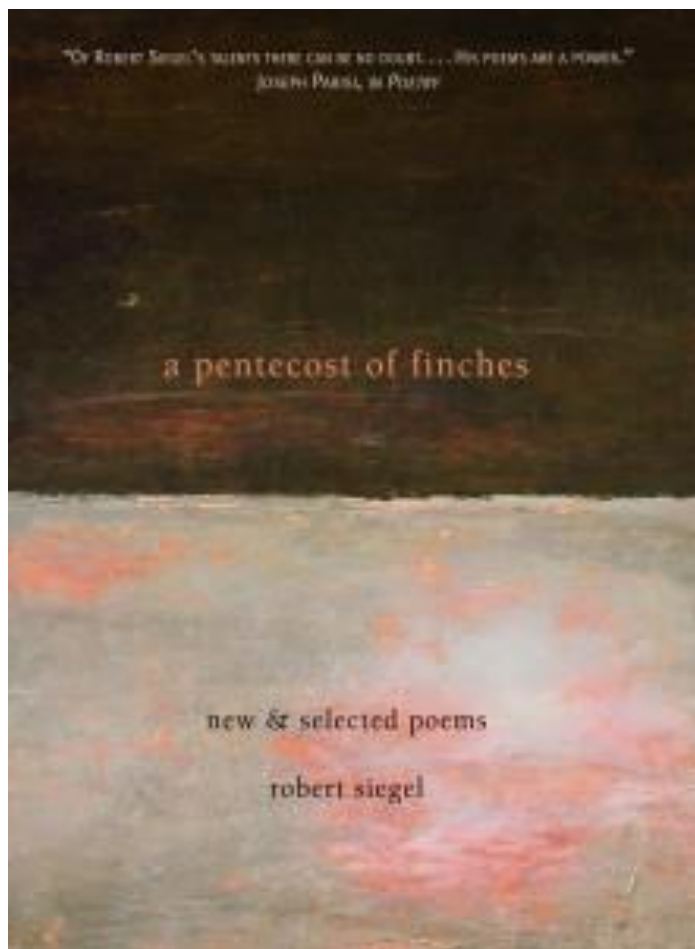
and charity, so in these

low white spheres we contemplate

mirroring heavens: petals, tongues

stammering silent music from

one root of fire.



Available through Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts

These above three poems and the following nine, together with those quoted earlier, are from Robert Siegel's book, "A Pentecost of Finches: New & Selected Poems," Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts., 2006. Copyright Robert Siegel, 2006. None may be reproduced by any means, print or electronic, without the written permission of the author.

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ADDENDUM I

-

Lazarus

Nothing tasted like a wafer on his tongue

It wasn't new, he'd tasted it once before—

In the myriad of years before he was,

and *that* took no time at all, the nothing before

everything else. As a boy he'd thought about it:

Why was there *anything* at all? The feeling

it led to was pleasant and dark, detached as if

he'd suddenly expanded to fill the ceiling.

And then, of course, the debts, the illness, the quarrels

between his sisters that drove him up the wall—

he'd left all these, thank God! Relief had swirled
through him with the fever until nothing was all.

But now this traveling magician with his meddling work
was drawing him back to his body—cold, stiff, and dark.

The Hunt

(Welsh form: Cwyvdd Llosgyrnog)

A locust leaf quivers, is still.

He's gone. I plunge through a well
of light, fall on a root,

leave beetles circling the broken
punk of a dead log. Twigs reckon
my eyes unwakened. Sly, mute

spiders apply theories, webs
that shrivel as I pass. Small dreads
hive in the woods, sting, smart.

A stream—bubbles bead his trail—
wading, images break—to fail
seems a good. Hell swarms with gnats.

Footfalls through long shafts of sun, moon,
Breathing loud, hands my only weapon,
I lunge at last. Self-cheated—

a reek of pelt, a glittering eye,
a chiding of birds. Undone I
turn.
Mouth wide, he leaps.

Evening Wolves

...fiercer than evening wolves. Habakkuk 1:8

Round and round they go on about nothing,
on the platinum compact disk of the moon,
the wolves. Their howls revolve about
the nothing that's eaten your life to its skin
even as it eats the moon to a thin rind.

Each revolution of the sound has a silvery
quaver, a light dip and resolution,
a tremolo, like recordings from the Twenties
of voices sheer and faded as old silk.

Listen, the siren starts up again and circles
in its long ascent and decline about the rim,
its aria of desire and desolation,
a litany of memory and loss
and regret settled into like this broken chair
on a winter evening while the last light falls
unravelling by two flies at the window.
Cooling, they creep and stumble on the sill.

The wolves leave despair like a silver needle singing
in the blood, a fear of the blankness of snow,

of the hot slaver of hunger at your throat,
and the red eyes weaving a knot around you
while the fire gutters and you hear no answer
but a murderous vibration among the trees.

Worse still would be the absence of this fear,
locked in this cabin with yourself and the moon,
worse for the head lifted in ululation
to make no sound at all but a dry static,
the O of the empty mouth yawning, the vacant
syllable of the moon fading to a white silence—
no dark accusatory, no gathering of angels,
no judgment of teeth like a necklace of knives,
no unyielding jaws locked to your throat.
The last pain is the absence of all pain.

Just two winter flies, a jot and a tittle,
as the muffled clock beats against the silence
in the empty room, a jot and a tittle
against the solid glass
through which you might make a run for the river,
risking the swift analysis of the teeth
cleaving sinew from joint.

Better to be driven by the pack
through the trees toward the overwhelming sound of water
and, desperate, pitch yourself beyond yourself,
over the cliff into the cataract,
into the thrash and tunder of Niagara—
risk drowning and a quick oblivion that at last
you might rise again, broken and absolved.

Sows Ear

Here comes a lusty Wooer,

My a Dildin my a Daldin,

Here comes a lusty Wooer,

Lilly bright and Shine. A.

Fifty sows dozing in the hard packed yeard,
fifty sows, all sizes, from purple majesty
to pink ninny,
fifty, sluttish, given to untidy houses,
the open robe of morning, flea in the air,
snorting, swilling the bay-strewn water,
some indifferent as the Sierra Madre
steaming over deserts, features lost
in foothills and ridges of fait,
others petulant, bristling
practicing the small clean bite.

The lean young boar, thick-necked
walks a plank from the truckbed,
razor-backed, tufted, tusks rounded to ball-bearings,
lord of the mountains, the hills of flesh,
the little valleys spread before him.

He is small, but the muscles of his neck
can break a hound, or a man's leg.
First one, sullen, whitish-purple in the heat,
stands off, pegs the dirt—mean hussy—

grunts. *Come show me. Bastard!*

Grunts, and grunts again.

Though he doesn't turn toward her, he sees her.

Still, he waits for her waddling run,

her little yellow teeth

bared for the swipe at his haunch,

swivels and knocks her off balance—

blood pudding, sack of fat!

Terror curdling from her throat, she

telegraphs herself to a far corner,

peg peg peg peg peg

The second, caught off-guard,

lies where she falls, croaking.

But the third,

mother of clouds and mountains,

400 pounds of mauve-and-pink repose,

feels their cries stoke and fire in her bowels,

a vein of lava creep from marble hams,

through vesuvial lungs,

to the flexing crab of her brain.

Uncertainly, on one leg, then two,

she jacks herself from the primal pool

where gnats nadder and dance.

Mud swings crusted on her teats,

falls in patches from her belly:

What are these that tickled the brain?

Love's tiny cries? The yammering mouths?

Squeals that hang like sausages?

No, not those tender attentions.

Dimly, she remembers something

unlocked from her, a tremor, a quake

an eruption,

when once she opened and

free of her hulk

the delicate she of dream

danced like rain on a corrugated roof,

pooled in cool wallows,

sprouted under tender thistle,

rolled in goldenrod and clover,

frisked with cat and suckling.

Turning toward hm like a locomotive

on its turntable, the steam

of her memories creasing all her jowls
to one truculent smile, she charges:

*Oh to be the blue fly, the bee, golden,
jigging above the ticklish purple!*

BANG

*Aye, this is the rub,
the tickle of love! she snorts, enamored*

BANG

*Oh honey bee! Sweetling,
hungry for my attentions!*

Again she turns where the boar, dizzy
and sore in the neck, stands baffled.
Having assaulted with his head the Himalayas,
having not gotten over the foothills,
he staggers in disbelief
as Everest trundles toward him.

This is the one! Husband! she croons

full and resonant as a bullfrog.

Sweet chop, me porker, my honey cob!

O what a squall of pipers,
what a regiment of bloodcurdling love,
dooms over the highlands of her corpus
resounding from glen and hillside
as she advances on him to a corner,
stale and snuffed as Macbeth,
head slung low, as all the world marches on him,
to meet the fate, perilous, magnificent,
of fathering five hundred friskers.



Reading commissioned poem at Wheaton College for eighth President Philip Ryken

These last five poems are from Robert Siegel's book, "A Pentecost of Finches: New & Selected Poems," 2006 first printing, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts.

ADDENDUM II

Silverfish

It lives in the damps of rejection,
in the dark drain, feeding upon the effluvia
of what we are, of what we've already been.

Everything comes down to this: we are its living—
the fallen hair, the fingernail, the grease from a pore,
used toothpaste, a detritus of whiskers and dead skin.

All this comes down and worries it into life,
its body soft as lymph, a living expectoration,
a glorified rheum. In the silent morning

when we least expect it, it is there
on the gleaming white porcelain: the silver scales,
the many feelers *busy busy*, so fast, it is

unnerving, causing a certain panic in us,
a galvanic revulsion (*Will it reach us*

before we reach it?), its body

translucent, indefinable, an electric jelly
moving with beautiful sweeps of the feet
like a sinuous trireme, delicate and indecent,

sexual and cleopatric. It moves for a moment
in the light, while its silver flashes and slides,
and part of us notices an elusive beauty,

an ingenious grace, in what has been cast off.
As if tears and the invisibly falling dandruff,
skin cells and eyelashes

returned with an alien and silken intelligence,
as if chaos were always disintegrating into order,
elastic and surprising,

as if every cell had a second chance
to link and glitter and climb toward the light,
feeling everything as if for the first time—

pausing stunned, stupefied with light.

before we, frightened by such possibilities,
with a large wad of tissue come down on it,

and crush it until it is nothing
but dampness and legs, an oily smear
writing a broken Sanskrit on the paper,

a message we choose not to read
before committing it to the water
swirling blankly at our touch,

hoping that will take care of it,
trying not to think of it—the dark
from which it will rise again.

-

Half a Second

A movement like a shutter's
and I am outside the dark box—
the ship suddenly outside the bottle.

Instead of empty, everything is full.

There is no absence:

every sail luffs out, every rope sings.

There is no more to be said.

There never was,

but one goes on saying. It is

the hopeless addiction of the tongue

to an ecstasy of particulars:

the snap of young peas, the onion's bite,

the tomato's pulsing alarm

the lupine's lavender finial,

the white cat by the feeder

in a raptus of hummingbirds.

Not only this place, this time,

but all places, all time:

everywhere—nowhere.

It is freedom, it is laughter.

Closing the eyelids and raising them.

That white cloud hanging there forever.

-

The Serpent Speaks

Soul: Look on that fire, salvation walks within.

Heart: What theme had Homer but original sin?

—Yeats

And three begot the ten thousand things.

—Lao Tzu

I am another vine
in the great democracy of vines
part of the complexity that defies explanation
part of the tree you put your back to
alert, but never suspecting.
I am the cold coil around the warm trunk,
I expand
as your lungs, poor rabbits, twitch and swell.
I am a long story with lovely yellows
and dapples and shades
a beginning, middle, and end that you can get lost in

a sunny patch followed by a shadow
a green dapple and twist, the turn, the unexpected
reversal.

When you come to the denouement
and my tail narrows to nothing
you wish to go back to the beginning and start over
where the red lie flickers in the leaves
beneath eyes like mica moons.

It is the old story, the beginning of everything
but really a long divagation and excursus
in which the woman naked and trembling
complains to the man, weeping over and over
and his voice rises in sharp jabs
while all their unborn children listen.

It is something that interrupts the afternoon, the first day,
and history begins and wanders off for millenia
missing the whole point.

It is these subtle shades on my scales
this maze of intricate lines
that lead back upon themselves in endless recursions
that fascinate you, that lead you endlessly

from my tail into my mouth.

In the moving light of the jungle I am a simple
body-stocking of shadows and weave
under a fritillary of bird cries to a sensuous music
a harmony to all your doings
promising you the ultimate knowledge in my belly
down the dark tube of years:

Light and shadow, light and shadow, the days and nights pass
with increasing speed like stations and their intervals
and you sway holding the strap
the car-lights flickering
wondering whatever was your original destination.

When fiction held out its red lie among the roses
you followed it down my dark throat.
It seemed utterly reasonable. Then you were Methuselah
carrying each of his 900 years like a brick on his back
Abraham's wild surmise with a knife
Joseph starving in a hole
and Moses singeing his feet in the wilderness.
Next they hung you from two sticks and slowly
everything grew more dramatic:
Augustine heard the children in the garden

Aquinas fled from the naked peasant
and Columbus woke in a sweat, the voices still singing
of a lost world
of amber waves and alabaster
until Lord Amherst gave his blankets to the Indians
Franklin saw the flashing key
and Washington sold his horse for pasturage
until the utterly reasonable Robespierre offered up his head
Lenin popped from a boxcar
and Einstein gave you the terrible secret
which I had promised,
a man of violins and God.

Now the story has gotten out of hand
as you swarm upon yourselves like maggots
on a diminishing dung-pile
and frenzied, move toward the catastrophe
history a string of boxcars
each a century stuffed to overflowing
until the last leaps the track.

Meanwhile I who am the truth move
scintillatingly, with grace in my own shadow

telling the story: *There was a man, and a woman. . .*

and the sun rose

and they went on a long journey

and night fell and they did not know where they were.

Such is knowledge, such is the fruit I offered
without the encumbrances of love, without listening
without the tree of fire that burns
below all movement, all shining, the tree below the bones
whose flames reach through the skeleton and hover
just over the fingers
and burn away the forest where the ego
goes crying, alone—one eye balancing the other
bilaterally symmetrical—
of what it has and what it hasn't
until all shapes are shining and
fear falls away shriveling like a black net
and the wisdom of God dances freely before you
and the glowing fruit blushes for the mouth.

I see all clear and can tell you
the end of things, knowing you will not listen,
for my knowledge is cold here in the forest

and you will follow the shifting arabesque
of moonlight on my mica-glint, my scales
moving like the sequins of days, events,
the rise of stocks and the next presidential election
and the price of wheat futures in a drought.

So I go on, flowing into my own shape
into the darkness I have made, subservient
(and this is the bitterness beyond all blankness)
at the last to another purpose
which you cannot guess, which rings in these leaves

like the harps and fiddles of insects too high
for your range of hearing—a music which drives me
into the narrowing circle I have made
tail in mouth, swallowing until
I vanish
and everything in this circle vanishes with me.

Rinsed with Gold, Endless, Walking the Fields

Let this day's air praise the Lord—
Rinsed with gold, endless, walking the fields,
Blue and bearing the clouds like censers,
Holding the sun like a single note
Running through all things, a *basso profundo*
Rousing the birds to an endless chorus.

Let the river throw itself down before him,
The rapids laugh and flash with his praise,
Let the lake tremble about its edges
And gather itself in one clear thought
To mirror the heavens and the reckless gulls
That swoop and rise on its glittering shores.

Let the lawn burn continually before him
A green flame, and the tree's shadow
Sweep over it like the baton of a conductor,
Let winds hug the housecorners and woodsmoke
Sweeten the world with her invisible dress,
Let the cricket wind his heartspring
And draw the night by like a child's toy.

Let the tree stand and thoughtfully consider

His presence as its leaves dip and row
The long sea of winds, as sun and moon
Unfurl and decline like contending flags.
Let blackbirds quick as knives praise the Lord,
Let the sparrow line the moon for her nest
And pick the early sun for her cherry,
Let her slide on the outgoing breath of evening,
Telling of raven and dove,
The quick flutters, homings to the green houses.

Let the worm climb a winding stair,
Let the mole offer no sad explanation
As he paddles aside the dark from his nose,
Let the dog tug on the leash of his bark,
The startled cat electrically hiss,
And the snake sign her name in the dust

In joy. For it is he who underlies
The rock from its liquid foundation,
The sharp contraries of the giddy atom,
The unimaginable curve of space,
Time pulling like a patient string,
And gravity, fiercest of natural loves.

At his laughter, splendor riddles the night,
Galaxies swarm from a secret hive,
Mountains split and crawl for aeons
To huddle again, and planets melt
In the last tantrum of a dying star.

At his least signal spring shifts
Its green patina over half the earth,
Deserts whisper themselves over cities,
Polar caps widen and wither like flowers.

In his stillness rock shifts, root probes,
The spider tenses her geometrical ego,
The larva dreams in the heart of the peachwood,
The child's pencil makes a shaky line,
The dog sighs and settles deeper,
And a smile takes hold like the feet of a bird.

Sit straight, let the air ride down your backbone,
Let your lungs unfold like a field of roses,
Your eyes hang the sun and moon between them,
Your hands weigh the sky in even balance,

Your tongue, swiftest of members, release a word

Spoken at conception to the sanctum of genes,

And each breath rise sinuous with praise.

Let your feet move to the rhythm of your pulse

(Your joints like pearls and rubies he has hidden),

And your hands float high on the tide of your feelings.

Now, shout from the stomach, hoarse with music,

Give gladness and joy back to the Lord,

Who, sly as a milkweed, takes root in your heart.

Wheaton College Choir

Advent Carol "The King Shall Come" Wheaton College Illinois Christmas Festival, Mary Hopper Conducting I, Michael Linton, am the composer/arranger of this music and own the copyright. You are free to download the music and share it with others if you do so for non-commercial purposes. A reference score for the piece can be seen at the site refinersfire.us under the menu heading "scores."

Interview: Peter Cole, Jewish poet/translator gives his stark answers to questions in this ongoing series



American poet/translator Peter Cole

In another of the ongoing series with Anglican and Christian poets this religion writer chose to interview Jewish poet and translator Peter Cole. One of his agents suggested a Jewish poet, though Ofer Ziv of [Blue Flower Arts](#) knew the series was made up of Christians and Anglicans.

The mystic, poet, secular Jewish married man of letters who is a scholar is reticent to use the word “God” in an interview, and even reticent to admit to a belief in the Almighty. Yet this religious and spiritual scholar and poet has a recent book of translations of works from the Kabbalah in the book titled [*The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition*](#).

This ancient discipline of understanding the Almighty in the Jewish tradition is a mystical and mysterious exercise in religious practice that continues into our own day—this 21st Century. If one asks, Where are we going, even in the Christian community, it does good to look towards the

mystics be they Christian or Jew. This eminent and if not celebrated translator Peter Cole fits the bill of man who finds the kind of no God experience of mystery in the Kabbalah work. That is, if this Religion Writer may takes some liberties based on visiting [the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco](#) where a room of men and women heard him speak of Kabbalah, read from his new book, and talk of matters poetic and scholarly in the Jewish tradition. Peter Cole was on tour in March, and as a guest in the house of the Jewish Community, that though not Temple, is certainly a specific place of community life and interest; Peter Cole makes a noteworthy presentation and appearance, even so far as to engage the audience with his translations and his own poetry. Here are two samples of his translation work from the new book of Kabbalah writings:

THE POETRY OF KABBALAH

**The stakes couldn't be higher: extraction of
light from the container of sound; ascent to the
Throne of God and direct vision of His Glory;
the eradication of coarseness and the forces of
darkness; a path to redemption, sometimes
through sin; the achievement of erotic union
on high — which is to say, the sacred marriage
of feminine and masculine aspects within the
Deity. “Great is the power of the poem recited
for the sake of heaven,” writes one late-
seventeenth-century North African poet. “It
unites all the [spiritual] qualities
like a sacrificial offering, aligns the [heavenly]
channels, and gives rise to effulgence in all
worlds — above and below.”**

The poet explains: In this Kabbalistic context, poems not only depict a mystical process, they produce it . . . In other words, the hymns of the Jewish mystical tradition demonstrate how song — almost magically, and at times with actual magic — can conduct and preserve transformative knowledge, even for those who don't quite know what they know. Moreover, they show how a vision of the manifold linkage of all things and all degrees of thought and feeling might be registered in the cadence and weave of a line of verse, a series of wedded sounds in the air.

T O R I S E O N H I G H

**To rise on high
and descend below,
to ride the chariot's wheels
and explore in the world,
to wander on earth
and contemplate splendor,
to bask in the blessing
of the Crown
and sound Glory,
to utter praises
and link letters, to utter names
and behold what is
above and below,
to know the meaning
of the living
and see the vision
of the dead.**

To ford rivers of fire

and know lightning.

—from *The Poetry of Kabbalah*

Poem by the poet:

IMPROVISATION ON LINES BY ISAAC THE BLIND

Only by sucking, not by knowing,

can the subtle essence be conveyed—

sap of the word and the world's flowing

that raises the scent of the almond blossoming,

and yellows the bulbul in the olive's jade.

Only by sucking, not by knowing.

The grass and oxalis by the pines growing

are luminous in us—petal and blade—

as sap of the word and the world's flowing;

a flicker rising from embers glowing;

light trapped in the tree's sweet braid

of what it was sucking. Not by knowing

is the amber honey of persimmon drawn in.

An anemone piercing the clover persuades me—

sap of the word and the world is flowing.

across separation, through wisdom's bestowing,

and in that persuasion choices are made:

But only by sucking, not by knowing

that sap of the word through the world is flowing.

—from *Things on Which I've Stumbled*

Translation by the poet:

TO THE SOUL by Avraham Ibn Ezra, 1092

Sent down from a luminous fountain of life,

drawn from a sacred place, and pure,

created as one, though not with form,

and greater by far than honor or wisdom—

why were you ushered into the world

and then in the dark of the body imprisoned?

At first its sleep seems sweet to you,

but in the end it's hard and bitter.

**Put the pleasures of Time behind you,
unless in exile you'd always wander.
Consider your glory, for this is your Good,
to serve the living God in awe:
take counsel while living within this world—
and be bound in the one-to-come with the Lord.
—from *The Dream of the Poem*, trans. Peter Cole**

Perhaps you as reader are not familiar with the name Peter Cole, or even Madonna, a Hollywood figure who studies Kabbalah as well. She is a part of the ever popular movement towards that mystery of ancient Judaism. But she is a singer, and like other Hollywood types we don't take their study seriously, unless we are fans. Peter Cole is taken seriously in the Jewish community and among academics and religious types.

If you as reader have heard of this list of notable organizations, This religion writer thinks you will agree they are impressive. These are the titles and awards held and worn almost like an unseen necklace by poet/translator Peter Cole.

**Winner of the 2010 TLS Risa Domb/Porjes Translation Prize, Jewish Book Council
Winner of the 2007 R. R. Hawkins Award, Association of American Publishers Winner of
the 2007 Award for Best Professional/Scholarly Book in Humanities, Association of
American Publishers Winner of the 2007 Award for Best Professional/Scholarly Book in
Literature, Language, and Linguistics, Association of American Publishers Winner of the
2007 National Jewish Book Award in Poetry Finalist for the 2007 National Jewish Book
Award in Sephardic Culture Peter Cole is the recipient of a 2007 MacArthur Fellowship**

Peter Cole is a winner of a 2010 Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

They are ones Princeton University Press notes. Here is another “award.”

As one scholar and poet says of this seeker of God, this man involved with the ineffable, adding another acclamation to the poet’s list: “Peter Cole is a true maker. His extraordinary learning is deep and personal, and his poems, like his translations, are powered by a large spiritual quest to link and light the world with words. He stands with amazement before great mysteries.” —Edward Hirsch

His most recent work that brought him on the tour, which came down to local communities in the Jewish world USA, even to the County Community Center in my own area, Marin County. The Poetry Foundation: The work is *Peter Cole’s [The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition](#)* ... from [Yale University Press](#). It is a handsome hardback, Yes.

In this literary study of religion, for Peter Cole is an intellectual and well educated man, too, When attending his talk at Jewish Community Center of San Francisco this religion writer kept wondering as others have, do the mystics, those who study mystics and in particular Kabbalah, those who are poets, too, and of course the ones seeking Union with God—do not they tell us something of the way the Church needs to go. In a recent conversation over coffee with the Rector of the Episcopal parish I attend located north of San Francisco, the Rector spoke about having to know about his flock, their spiritual need, and even the Church’s spiritual needs as well. In the coffee shop Peets we talked of the poet and what vision or understanding is offered in such work and of course in such thought.

In the New Directions published work, the poet again creates a gem for those interested in the mystery of God, and in the religious poetry of history, especially those of the Jewish faith, the recent work, [Things on Which I’ve Stumbled](#), published 2008 is the book from which earlier examples found in this article of his poetry are posted. This man Peter Cole has a body of work. The recent book is [listed](#) this way:

**The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical
Verse from the Jewish
Tradition**Translated and Annotated

by Peter Cole
Yale University Press,
April 2012
Co-edited and with an
afterword by Aminadav Dykman

In an interview in [Bomb magazine](#) with Ben Lerner, the poet says:

Ben Lerner I'm interested in how your work as translator and as poet relate, how one practice influences the other. How does translating from different epochs and geographies—the Hebrew Golden Age in Muslim Spain, the contemporary Middle East—shape your sense of the present in which your own composition takes place?

Peter Cole They relate like the closest relations—usually loving, sometimes hating, often hovering, and occasionally smothering. Ultimately they mean, quite literally, the world to one another. I began translating as a poet to get inside other poetics that appealed to me and also to bring them back to friends. One thing led to another: the modern to the medieval, the American to the Middle Eastern and Andalusian, which in turn led back to the American (my own). Now, in a sense, it's a little like Chuangtzu's predicament, the Chinese philosopher who was so deeply released into his dream of being a butterfly that when he woke he didn't know if he was Chuangtzu who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly who was dreaming he was Chuangtzu. I used to want to separate the poet from the translator in me, but that's no longer possible, nor is it desirable. On the contrary.

This excerpt, "Peter Cole by Ben Lerner," was originally commissioned by, edited, and published in BOMB Magazine, Issue 105, Fall 2008, pp. 40-7. © Bomb Magazine, New Art Publications

Coexistence: A Lost and Almost Found Poem

By [Peter Cole](#) Peter Cole

*And the Levites shall speak, and say unto all the men of Israel, with a loud voice: —
Deuteronomy 27:14*

Over the border the barrier winds,
devouring orchards of various kinds.

*Cursed be he that taketh away
the landmark of his neighbor.*

And all the people shall say, Amen.

The road was blocked in a battle of wills—
as the lame and sightless trudged through the hills.

*Cursed be he that maketh the blind
to go astray in the way.*

And all the people shall say, Amen.

The army has nearly written a poem:
You'll now need a permit just to stay home.

*Cursed be he that perverteth the justice
due to the stranger (in Scripture).*

And all the people shall say, Amen.

Taken away—in the dead of night—
by the secret policeman, who might be a Levite.

*Cursed be he that turneth to smite
his neighbor in secret murder.*

And all the people shall say, Amen—

as peace is sought through depredation,
living together in separation.

Cursed be he that confirmeth not

the words of this law—to do them.

And all the people shall say, Amen.

Source: *Poetry* (June 2008).

In the work, *The Dream of the Poem* translator Peter Cole also writes of Arabic poetry. For in the era of research on Jewish poetry, there is also the Arabic. In his presentation that this writer attended in San Francisco, it is noteworthy that he says Jews lived in the Middle East. So they were greatly influenced by that geographic proximity, and the translator did in the work [*The Dream of the Work: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain*](#) reflect the poetry of the era in its historic perspective, as is done in this work mentioned published by [Princeton University Press](#). Jews also lived in Spain, and again they reflect the poetry of the era in its historic perspective. Princeton says this of the poet and the book in their promotion text:

Hebrew culture experienced a renewal in medieval Spain that produced what is arguably the most powerful body of Jewish poetry written since the Bible. Fusing elements of East and West, Arabic and Hebrew, and the particular and the universal, this verse embodies an extraordinary sensuality and intense faith that transcend the limits of language, place, and time.

Peter Cole's translations reveal this remarkable poetic world to English readers in all of its richness, humor, grace, gravity, and wisdom. The Dream of the Poem traces the arc of the entire period, presenting some four hundred poems by fifty-four poets, and including a panoramic historical introduction, short biographies of each poet, and extensive notes. (The original Hebrew texts are available on the Princeton University Press Web site.) By far the most potent and comprehensive gathering of medieval Hebrew poems ever assembled in English, Cole's anthology builds on what poet and translator Richard Howard has described as "the finest labor of poetic translation that I have seen in many years" and "an entire revelation: a body of lyric and didactic verse so intense, so intelligent, and so vivid that it appears to identify a whole dimension of historical consciousness previously unavailable to us." The Dream of the Poem is, Howard says, "a crowning achievement."

INTERVIEW WITH PETER COLE BY RELIGION WRITER, PETER MENKIN

Peter Cole wrote answers to questions from his home in New Haven, Connecticut:



Poet/translator

PM: Why as a secular Jew do you write Jewish poetry?

PC: I'm not sure I can explain that, except to say that my poetry and my Jewishness come from what feels like the same, deep-seated place in me. Perhaps they're adjacent, or merely aligned. In any case, while I by no means write an exclusively Jewish poetry, much of the poetry that I do write has an informed notion of Jewishness at its heart.

As a scholar interested in things holy, do you find your faith and understanding of God even made more deep and real? This not only in your work of poetry, but in your translation work—specifically your recent book, *The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition*.

I wouldn't call myself a scholar. I'm a poet who is drawn to a certain kind of scholarship, or who, at any rate is not put off by it. And that involvement with it certainly intensifies and enriches my engagement with the world as a Jew.

The many years of work on this book have of course deepened my understanding of the world of Kabbalah and my faith in the work of words, but not my faith in the word "God."

Do you find yourself a peace person as Jew in Jerusalem?

Absolutely.

Do you have children?

No.

In what manner are you a part of the Jewish Community if not a practicing Jew with membership in a Temple?

Jews are "part of the Jewish Community," whether or not they observe the *mitzvot*, or commandments, or belong to a synagogue or Temple. Some are active in that community, some are passive. For some, that community provides the core of their identity; others define themselves against that community. Being Jewish has as much or more to do with how one is raised (and behaves) as with what one says one believes.

I live a deeply Jewish life, and Judaism is very much at the center of my concerns as a human being and as a poet and translator. I'm fluent in Hebrew and live a large part of my life in the language. I've also worked extensively with a wide range of Hebrew literature, as well as with Arabic literature. I'm a citizen of Israel (and of the U.S.), and have been a resident of Jerusalem for thirty years. I live the rhythms of the Jewish week and the Jewish year.

Why did you move to Jerusalem and then return to USA.

I moved to Jerusalem initially to study Hebrew, fell in love with the language and the city, and decided to stay. I still live there, but my wife and I also spend part of the year in the US. By and large, we now divide our time evenly: January through June in New Haven and July through December in Jerusalem.

Of the Hebrew poets and writers in this and the last century, who comes to mind as a favorite and why?

Avraham Ben Yitzhak was a legendary early 20th-century Hebrew poet whose entire body of work consists of 11 poems, two of them masterpieces, and the others sublime in their various ways. I've always felt very close to his poetry. I translated his *Collected Poems*, Avraham Ben Yitzhak (Ibis Editions, 2003). I also hold the work of the contemporary Israeli poet Aharon

Shabtai in very high regard and have translated a good deal of it, most recently in *War & Love, Love & War: New and Selected Poems*, Aharon Shabtai (New Direction, 2010).

In the Bible, what book or section speaks to you as a poet and translator?

I seem to be drawn, steadily, to the Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus, the parts of Leviticus treating sacrifice, and the parts of the Book of Exodus treating the construction of the sanctuary.

I am looking for a quote from you of a Biblical kind, even short reiteration of the story part that sticks out in your mind.

“Choose life.”

Have you taught University?

Yes, I’ve taught at Middlebury College, Wesleyan University, and Yale University. I’ll be teaching at Yale again next spring.

And if so, where and what kind of student do you like?

I like all sorts of students, so long as they’re curious and willing to work hard.

Do you want to say something about any poets or poetry of the spiritual or religious kind in general?

Generally speaking, I try not to use the word “spiritual” or “religious” in relation to poetry unless they have historical referents to a specific poetry, genre, or cultural context.

I see by the notes on your wife, a literary woman, that yours is a kind of marriage some will call, literary. Do you find your marriage that way?

No. Adina and I do what we love, and it’s been our great fortune that what each of us loves overlaps with what the other does. Our lives are “literary,” in that literature is at their core. But so are other things.

Do you find yourself engaged in the world and lives of those you bring alive in translation and poetry?

It seems that way from the radio interview you did with your wife about your recent book, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza*:

<http://why.org/cms/radiotimes/2011/05/16/sacred-trash-a-treasure-trove-of-the-cairo-geniza/> .

Deeply—otherwise, why bother? Both poetry and translation should extend one's sense of self and world. The way out is often the way in, and the reverse, fortunately, is also true.

ADDENDUM

And So the Skin . . .

And So the Skin . . .

By [Peter Cole](#)Peter Cole

And so their pounded hearts
were worn—
like a badge
or talisman,
that canceled
almost all their blindness—
creation's linkage depending
on a drive itself
derived from a kind of kindness
or desperation, the sense that one's
inadequate,
at any rate

the space for time—
water has it, flowing
(even from a faucet . . .)
and here the black swan glides across it—
as the sunlight's suddenly on my back,
and now the skin along it's warmer,
Lord,
which lets me walk by the river . . .

Source: *Poetry* (June 2008).

Interview: American Anglican poet Luci Shaw at 83—with Addendum of her poems



Luci Shaw, American poet--taken when camping

Here is the interview done with American poet Luci Shaw, of Washington State in the Northwest. This is another in a series of interviews with Anglican and American poets. (Luci Shaw is an Anglican—attends Episcopal Church in her Washington State.)

She decided to respond to questions by writing answers, and this interview reflects her request so that she could email her answers. She did so and the answers were received October 1, 2011. At 83 years old, with 30 books to her credit, she's finished another work that she hopes to see published about what it means to get to be older in years. This writer asked her a little about the subject of her book proposal, and herewith the interview.

- 1. 1. In your poem, “Mary Considers Her Situation,” there is a simplicity and at the same time reality to your statement about her as Mother of God. One question that**

so many poets are asked is what is their muse that brings them to write about a certain subject? That is my first question, but more, what is there about Mary as a figure in the story that captures the eye of your imagination? Will you share something of this vision and faith with us?

I find in Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her willing involvement in the drama of Incarnation, an almost infinite world of possibility for reflection and poetry. My collection, *Accompanied by Angels*, includes many poems about this ordinary, extraordinary young woman. She can be viewed from so many different angles.

I have always seen her as a model, to both women and men, of active participation in the work of God no matter how tricky or risky it appears to be. She said Yes to being pregnant with God by the Holy Ghost, well knowing what that might do to her reputation as an unwed mother. She considered the call of God on her to be paramount.

She is also an example to all of us who wish to know new birth and growth in our own lives. In Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, particularly in Eugene Peterson's translation, I read:

“All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us. It's *within* us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We are also feeling

the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting.”

So, Mary is our example of fruitfulness. She also shows us what active submission of the finite to the Infinite *looks* like in an ordinary human being. She herself *incarnates* that obedience in a way the whole of Christendom remembers, if we reference all the religious art that features her through history.

In my poem, “Mary Considers Her Situation” (which will be featured in *The Christian Century* during Advent, 2011) I tried to *be* Mary, to get into her experience first-hand, to feel what this shocking event would evoke for her emotionally. I used the simple language of an untrained

teenage girl. And her first thought, “What will I say to my mother?” echoes what an adolescent today would ask herself before the amazement of the moment overwhelms her. And then, the reality. She will be “split” both physically, in birth, and split from the rest of humanity by her unique role.

1. **2. When I get in a conversation about getting older, and I am coming to my 65th birthday in October 2011, I try to admit to them and myself that this is a new stage in my life. But most people with whom I speak talk about aging and getting older as something to avoid, and their response is always, You are not so old. If I speak of someone in their 80s, this same kind of person says, They are not so old. I wonder what they will say if asked about someone in their 90s. My question for you because your latest book proposal is on getting into the later years of life, and you yourself are 83, what are a few of your thoughts and even poetic imaginings about aging? Is it such a fearful thing that so many of us must deny that getting old is even old at all?**

Getting older is so universal, so inevitable, so impossible to avoid unless you die young, that it is surprising to me that so many are in denial about it. The common view of aging is that it is a state of weakness, pain, passivity and immobility in which meaningful life has ceased to exist. The book I have just written is a demonstration that the opposite is possible. That spiritual and emotional growth and insight can happen. That the accumulated wisdom of a life-time becomes available for younger generations as the “senior citizen” continues to engage in the community.

Undoubtedly getting older has its downsides. Energy declines, bodily infirmities appear and multiply, memory may weaken, but the essential spirit of creativity and joy can still survive and flourish. My strategy is to stay aware of the wider world through reading, films, music, and the company of kindred spirits of any age. Most of my closest friends are decades younger than I am, but our age is not the focus of conversation, or our common ground, and even the issues on which we differ make for lively intercourse. Disagreements can be enlightening and widen the view!

1. **3. As someone who has lived in the great Northwest of the United States, Washington State, speak about some of the things that you like about the area where you live? Tell us how long you have lived there, and how you feel about being someone who lives and works in their own home? Do you find where you live a place of nurture and support as a poet?**

John and I have lived in the Pacific Northwest, just south of the Canadian Border, for about fifteen years. Bellingham is not a large city, but being a college town with a great independent bookstore and a flourishing Episcopal Church has made it a place of satisfaction and fulfillment for us. We love sailing, tent-camping, gardening. I love the opportunities for photography in this town on the shore of Puget Sound with its islands and pebbled shores. Within an hour's drive is Mt. Baker, snow-capped year-round, and Washington's Cascade Range as well as the Coastal Range of British Columbia. In contrast to California where we lived for eight years, the landscape here is green and the soil rich. We have lots of rain (the reason for all the green!) and rain forests, but moderate temperatures both summer and winter.

When we moved here we built a home on the edge of a ravine flanked by tall cedars and ferns, and my study opens on a flowing stream. I like to say that I write best to the sound of running water! I love having my writing space at home, with all my books, my walls ornamented with winged creatures—angels, icons, engraving of birds (by Barry Moser), and one gryphon.

This town teems with artists of every kind. I have lots of poet and writer friends, and a local poetry group which meets sporadically. The bookstore has a Literature Live program that allows me to do public readings. Some of my writer colleagues live elsewhere but we stay in touch on the internet.

1. **4. Sometimes we think that poetry about rhymes, and I notice that your work is not a work of rhyming for the sake of rhythm, but is a work that, nonetheless, sings to the reader. Is there something in the Bible that inspires your work, or brings to mind the poetic sensibilities that you bring out in the way of language in your own**

writing? What in the New or Old Testament sings for you? If you were to give some advice to young people of what to look for in developing their own work as a poet, even those in high school, what would you say in brief to them?

The poems I write seem to choose their own style, either formal or free. I find the iambic meter the most natural, echoing the human heart beat. Usually a phrase will arrive, from God knows where (literally) and I make a note of it and see where it is leading, or how it might develop. Words and phrases also jump out at me from the printed page of whatever I'm reading and demand to be used.

That is the art—the awareness of a possibility. The craft comes in the shaping of the idea or image, with its own rhymes, and assonances, and rhythms. I read new poems aloud, to test for line breaks and stanza breaks, but also for music and accessibility. My poetry is usually not “difficult,” though it may be dense and take several readings to unpack. (By the way, I haven't written 30 books of poetry; rather 30 books in different forms, though never fiction.)

I have gifted poet friends with whom I workshop on line and in person, who read and critique my new poetry before I submit it for publication in a literary journal, or publish a new collection. I do the same for them. Several sets of skilled eyes and ears are an amazing help in perfecting a poem.

My advice for young poets? Avoid “poetic language” and dreamy generalizations. Paint a picture with vivid details for your reader. Let verbs and nouns do most of the work, using modifiers sparsely. Work for both inevitability and surprise in your writing. Read the work aloud to test it. Read lots of good poetry by others so that language and angles of insight get into your bones. Buy books of poetry to sustain the industry.

1. **5. Talk to us a little bit about what appears to be an autobiographical work, “Leaf, Fallen?” What do you look for it to evoke in a reader, and what is it about the shortness of life you saw that resonates so that came to your mind in your own**

later years; and do you sometimes meditate on the many years passed and the years to come—even the end? I know this is a tough question, and to ask a poet to speak in an essay or expository manner seems almost a waste of time. But you are an essayist who has 30 books of poetry to her credit. Will you also tell us about your essay and expository writing, and how a poet comes to her subjects, those you’ve published? I am also fascinated to know more about your book proposal now at your agent’s about being in one’s senior years. This question seems a question of reflection and even a kind of savvy wisdom we expect of our elders—with hope. Yes, I do ask three part questions. So if you like, take each individually if you don’t find them related enough in their theme to make a fourth response.

I wrote the poem “Leaf, Falling,” as a recollection of my mother, who lived to be 99 ³/₄. As I get older myself, I’ve developed more of a fellow-feeling with her and a greater sympathy than in my youth. My brother and I were born, her only children, in her late forties, and she lived her life through us, a kind of proxy existence. She was a devout Christian, but legalistic to the point that our youthful explorations in faith and relationships and activities shocked and angered her. Her love was demanding enough to be crippling, and she was prone to depression, which colored our relationship negatively. My father was a totally different personality, bold, loving, risk-taking, a lover of art and poetry, and I carry his genes!

The poem uses the imagery of a leaf in Fall, because of its color, fragility and inevitably limited life span. My mother lived in Canada and I would travel from the States to the nursing home where she lived the last 30 years of her life. From age 70 on she would warn me of her imminent decease every visit, though she outlasted all her siblings and in-laws.

A lover of green in any form, I’m also a lover of leaves in any season, as well as the glorious skeletons of bare branches. Most of my books reflect this trend!

From Luci Shaw's webpage

If you were to pick three of your books of poetry, or if you prefer, name three of your own poems you liked a lot—what comes to mind now is okay—tell us something about them. In a more cleverly put way, talk to us about the mystery of the poem that you find of your own making and why this offers a sense of mystery when speaking to you? Hopefully, this will help your reader gain insight into your poetry, and poetry in general.



My most recent book of poems, *Harvesting Fog*, came about when I read a factoid in *The National Geographic*—that residents of Lima, Peru, get very little rain but are surrounded by a constant, clammy fog. To get more water, these clever people hang nets outside on which the fog and dew condenses. They can wring out these nets to augment their supplies.

It struck me that this technique is similar to the way a poet develops poetry. An idea or image is waiting in the air to be snagged and collected and aggregated with others, that the poet collects and drinks from in order to send a trickle into a world thirsty for beauty and meaning. This depends, of course, on a connection with the transcendent, an awareness of “things unseen” from the hand of God, who as a Creator created us to create. A friend once remarked to me: “Your gift is your spiritual discipline.” Thus using one’s gift to write or employ one’s craft is a way of saying thank you to God.

The Trend

for MKM

An autumn-colored sky like
the color of my friend Mary's
hair. Like the just-turning-to-flame

leaves on the vine maple
we planted only last year,
a gift surprising as

a birthday cake even though
it's expected. The mangoes in
the wooden bowl on the table

matches a color that flashes
from the bird's brilliant head
at the bird feeder. Even

the bright mesh of the ratty
pot-scrubber in my hand
is glory leaking through.

Luci Shaw

9/30/11

The Luci Shaw Fellowship

The Luci Shaw Fellowship from **Image Journal** on **Vimeo**.

The purpose of the Luci Shaw Fellowship is to expose a promising undergraduate student to the world of literary publishing and the nonprofit arts organization, and to introduce fellows to the contemporary dialogue about art and faith that surrounds Image, its programs, its contributors, and its peer organizations.

ADDENDUM

Christian Century poems

[Getting it right](#)

Sep 14, 2011 by [Luci Shaw](#)

Jesus might have died
a dozen times before he died.

An incidental death—tetanus
from a nail, a splinter.

A baptismal drowning.
A drink from a tainted well.

Rotten fish.
Desert thirst.

A stoning, a sudden
push over the edge,

or a falling overboard in a storm.
A choking by a demon on the loose,

a bar room brawl
at the local pub.

So when it happened, it seemed
like someone

got it right. Right time,
right reason,

for God to let it
happen.

Poetry

[States of being](#)

Mar 23, 2011 by [Luci Shaw](#)

Stability is greatly
overrated.

Why would I ever want to sit
still and smug as a rock,
confident, because of my great
weight, that I will not
be moved?

Better to be soft as water,
easily troubled, with
at least three modes
of being, able to shape-
shift, to mirror, to cleanse,
to drift downstream,
To roar when I encounter
the rock.

Poetry

[The green shiver](#)

Apr 25, 2011 by [Luci Shaw](#)

The forest floor bleak, choked
with old leaves, winter wet. Against
the evidence, buds on the wild dogwoods
glisten, listen for a signal, lining up
for bloom-time—when to burst and who'll
be first? Every year, it's all according
to weather, the wait for the heat-throb,
wind fresh through the naked
birch trunks longing to get green.
The pressure's on, like listening for a
starter pistol, finger on the trigger.

Spring is wound tight enough to let go
any minute. Overarching the ravine,
the cedars start their annual scatter of yellow
sexual dust for the next generation.
The clematis resists her tedium of cold and brown,
cancels her winter sleep with a vertical thrust
up the trellis, like a slow shooting star.

How can we help but hope, sprouts
urged to fulfill a kind of promise—
a covenant with the world that in unfolding,
leaf tips flaring up and out, woody hearts pregnant
with bloom and blessing, we will drink rain, light,
heat for our emerald living. We face the sun
full on—its lavish encouragement for cold to lift,
shift, and move away. Holding on, ready for
that shiver, a sliver of thrill like a jade thread
through a labyrinth, when within us
something fresh and green explodes.

Emmaus road remembered

My camera's eye waits to catch and hold

small chronicles of glint and shape and shine.

The subtle shadings in its blunt black

box all hold their breath until

a kind of resurrection happens on a screen

as esoteric magic translates them into sharp details

to see again, and show to friends.

Trust needs to know that sounds and sights

and words imprinted later, tell truth

about that couple, part of a holy triad

walking, listening, stopping for evening hunger—

did they get it right when they remembered?

Was he a phantom of their grief?

After the sudden vanishing did they

play with the crumbs, wondering?

How carefully did they gather those husks,

memorials of loaf and life and

resurrected bread? And can we learn from them

how to feast on mystery, taking a loaf

from the outstretched hand of the Unseen?

Luci Shaw

8-1-11

Psalm for the January Thaw Blessed be God for thaw, for the clear drops that fall, one by one, like clocks ticking, from the icicles along the eaves. For shift and shrinkage, including the soggy gray mess on the deck like an abandoned mattress that has lost its inner spring. For the gurgle of gutters, for snow melting underfoot when I step off the porch. For slush. For the glisten on the sidewalk that only wets the foot sole and doesn't send me slithering. Everything is alert to this melting, the slow flow of it, the declaration of intent, the liquidation. Glory be to God for changes. For bulbs breaking the darkness with their green beaks. For moles and moths and velvet green moss waiting to fill the driveway cracks. For the way the sun pierces the window minutes earlier each day. For earthquakes and tectonic plates-earth's bump and grind-and new mountains pushing up like teeth in a one-year-old. For melodrama—lightning on the sky stage, and the burst of applause that follows. Praise him for day and night, and light switches by the door. For seasons, for cycles and bicycles, for whales and waterspouts, for watersheds and waterfalls and waking and the letter W, for the waxing and waning of weather so that we never get complacent. For all the world, and for the way it twirls on its axis like an exotic dancer. For the north pole and the

south pole and the equator and everything between.

Peace on earthIn the tops of the cedars
ten crows are quarreling.
They do not believe in
conflict resolution. Now
they are flying off, glaring
at each other. Nothing
has been settled.

Soft Rock

You need only to live near mountains

to feel in your bones what age looks like. Take

the sandstone cliffs along our Northwest shore:

looking out over pebbled beaches glinting

with sea glass, their faces staring down the ocean,

never as pacific as it sounds. These bluffs

have offered themselves without rest to

the winds, the waters—rising, falling fifteen feet—

the extraordinary tides, rips that tear

water from water, that scour the shores.

This windless day, I am joined with

the low shelf I am sitting on. Warm

from noon sun, it's pitted into stone lace

by particles whirled by wind for a million years

in the rocks' shallow wounds. Any small grit

will do, grinding at the stone face, digging deeper,

carving empty eye sockets.

Lines of barnacles like white dried flowers

grow at the waterline, footnotes

to weather's virtuosity.

No one is watching.

Surreptitiously I lean left, touch,

test with my tongue the etched boulder

by my elbow, and taste the sharp salt of storms.

In that brief kiss I think I even sample

the ochre-gray tint of sands that once

laid down their duned lives

to become these rocks of ages.

Luci Shaw

8-5-11

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Sparrow

This undistinguished, indistinguishable bird—

this prototype of insignificance —

this very moment's sparrow at

our porch feeder—makes of his compactness

a virtue. From between the wires he pecks

the black sunflower seeds, neat head bobbing,

purposeful, economical, precise.

Watchful—peck and peek, peck and check.

I have seen scarlet tanagers, purple finches,

grosbeaks, red-footed gulls, even the arrogant

displays of peacocks. In his anonymity,

this small bird is who he is, his suit

brown-grey as damp dust, eyes bright beads.

This simple-ness, this pure unselfconsciousness,

this understated...this...Oh, the adjectives multiply,

but they are too large for this small one,

who humbles my own mud-brown heart.

Sometimes in my timidity I overcompensate

and try to sound large until I know such falsehood

is a betrayal.

He poises his nimble self to flick away, quick

as scissors—a cat, a squirrel,

my movement at the glass door.

I tilt my head for a better angle, and he's gone,

off to his green barracks, hidden in the cedar branches

until, a minute later, his next feeder foray.

LS 8-5-11

Poet Jeanne Walker talks the business of poetry in an interview

by Peter Menkin

Another in the series of ongoing interviews with American poets. This interview with University of Delaware Professor Jeanne Walker is part of the special subset in this series called American Anglican poets. This writer talked by phone in June, 2011 with Jeanne from his home office north of San Francisco to Jeanne, who was in that morning time at her home in the Philadelphia, PA area. We spoke for an hour, and the poet was forthcoming about her work as a poet, and as an experienced University Professor of English (35 years). About being a teacher she says, “I’m fortunate not to live only with my peer group; I get to know people who are twenty-one and twenty-two. I go to class on Tuesday afternoon and it’s the only Tuesday afternoon we have. It’s our real life, and I talk with them about what they think about the text. The text is a meeting place for us to talk about what’s important.”

1. **1. Your email note of this week to me says, “At my most recent poetry reading I went back to read from older books—a decade old. Then I read some poems I had been working on in the last several months. It was a very sympathetic audience. I always find out something about the poems by reading them to an audience.” In looking over your University of Delaware notices regarding you as Professor and poet, I see you will be giving poetry readings at the University in September (the 29th, in fact). Intrigued as I am by the artistic and creative process, talk to us some about how a reading is done. For example, when reading before students and faculty mostly, do you choose different works than other readings? Tell us what you may read in September, and if you work on a specific oral style that you can describe when reading?**

I choose poems that mean something to the group I’m reading for. I usually don’t decide what I’m reading until several hours before, because then I generally have a better idea of whose going to be in the audience. I’ve read my own poems often enough so that I don’t need rehearsal. Above all, I think a poem should be clear to the audience. Getting the music into their ears involves reading slowly, pausing frequently, and annunciating clearly.

I've...to tell the truth...I've learned a great deal from the actors I work with in the theatre. I usually introduce each of the poems with a story, or an explanation of some kind. That gives the audience time to reflect between poems. It also gives them a sense of who wrote the poem and why. Poetry reading should be fun...not fun...but they should give pleasure. You want to connect with the audience, so they know it's as human...they know there's a connection to you. A poetry reading should give the audience time to ponder the great truths like: love, death, redemption, the mysteries of time and eternity. Because we live such fast lives, we don't get much time to reflect on what we're doing or why we're doing it. In the end what's more important than that kind of reflection?

Let me give you an example of a reading I did on [Whidbey Island](#), (off the coast of Seattle, WA USA). I was reading to students and faculty in the [Seattle Pacific Masters of Fine Arts Program](#), which is the low residency program where I teach. We know each other very well. It's a small elite program with about 7 faculty members, and about 50 students. So I read poems that I had recently been working on. I told the audience that they're new. That's unusual. I don't read new poems to a general audience, but I sometimes do read them to my students. I'm always reading and commenting on what they're writing and they get a kick out of hearing and commenting on what their mentors are doing.

Here's one of the poems I read, which may not, even now, be in its final draft:

FAULTS

Then my mother became my child.

I'd felt so light on the teeter-totter

that I was surprised by sudden power,

holding someone so important

in the sky with nothing but my weight

on the other side. It was kind of thrilling,

kind of strange. And I noticed the earth

is jagged with faults and fractures.

Grass staggers in uneven dirt and

the shoreline zigs and zags. You

can never glue the two uneven pieces

of a broken teacup perfectly together.

When she died, I worried about her

as if I'd driven her to her first day

of school and left her there alone.

For weeks I wondered, did she find

her class room? Is she making friends

in heaven? I'm trying to glue pieces

of the cup together. *Heaven* is roughly

what I mean. If God ever used that word,

he spoke in Hebrew. Nothing, it turns out,

has a simple surface. Maybe it's the

missing and the faults we have to love.

1. **2. In our conversation by phone this week in June, 2011, we talked a little about the business of poetry. After all, poetry books are written to be published, and published to be read, but also to be sold. You mentioned some of the general numbers various poetry books of kinds sell. Tell us a little about that, and do mention some of your own successes with their titles? Mostly, though, explain if poetry is a business to you, or if it is a business of writing and as in the book you worked on by Abilene Christian University Press, is the business of literature and poetry for the writer like you a matter of, "Shadow & Light: Literature and the Life of Faith?"**

Poetry doesn't make any business sense in this culture. Most books of poetry are published in small press runs usually not over 3,000 copies. There's no mass market for poetry. Most small presses that publish poetry don't even have marketing departments. And the trade presses that publish poetry don't pitch it to the public, even if they have big marketing budgets. Although children naturally use metaphors and they love wordplay, by the time they get to junior high, that's mostly been educated out of them. We tend to think of English as a practical affair. In hip hop that kind of razzle-dazzle wordplay has come back, but basically English in this country is for ordering pizza.

In places like Romania, and Iran, and even in Sweden, vast numbers of normal people read poetry. And they memorize it. There is a saying in Romania: Every Romanian is a poet.

Second Edition. Jeanne Walker is working on the 3rd Edition at this time of publication

Shadow & Light: Literature and the Life of Faith, is an anthology of spiritual literature written between the English renaissance and about the year 2000. I agreed to help edit that volume, because a collection like that didn't exist. We're working on a third edition now. I believe we need that kind of collection in our culture. It reveals the quest for God in a number of cultures and religious traditions. It's startling to read John Donne, for example, writing in the early 17th century about his very problematic faith, sounding almost like a contemporary.

1. **3. You say in an email to me, “I’ve taught for my whole career at The University of Delaware. That’s 35 years.” When it comes to teaching University students, what advice have you both for your students and for younger poets on the practice and the writing of poetry? Please offer something tangible when answering, like “create a chapbook” and what a chapbook means to you as an artist. If not a chapbook, how a book in its development has meaning for you, and what is some process of its beginning work.**

The most important advice I give my students is to read, to read everything they can get their hands on. I tell them to go back to the Anglo Saxon poets. Read *Beowulf*, and move forward through the tradition. Once you finish the English and American traditions and poetry from Canada, start reading in other languages. If you can’t read in the other languages, then read in translation. Read poems aloud. Think about the sounds and the rhythms and be aware of the metaphors. Take the poems you love apart, to see how they’re made. Use them as models to sit down and write from. Work seriously, and revise.

I would say, the same kind of work goes into a poem as goes into a musician’s performance of a violin concerto. Like a musician, a poet needs to practice her scales. Then in the middle of all that work, the muse might show up and you can move toward a real poem. The books come later. That’s not so difficult. It’s the writing that’s the real work. A lot of poets want to skip that part. You work hard and you practice, then you hide all the work and make it look effortless.

1. **4. This writer notes that you've a number of poetry books published, and the usual question for a writer can be, "What is your favorite of the lot?" Have you a particular poem in that book you'd like to tell us about, as it is an expression of the creative spirit, the Holy Spirit, and shows how it as literature reflects the poets life?**

I don't have a favorite book. They're all my children. This summer and fall I will be putting together a new and selected volume which will be brought out by **WordFarm Press** next year. It's a small press whose editors have all worked at other presses. They knew one another and liked each other and decided to start this press to fill a niche. They have a wonderful taste and the work they publish is good. They make beautiful books.

Yes, I do feel dependent on something when I am writing well. Like Milton and Spenser, I think of it as the Holy Spirit. But I am not sure the mystery is much different for poetry than for anything we do. How do our ideas spin out? How do the words keep materializing from nowhere? How do we keep breathing, even when we're not thinking about it? The fact that we can name the parts of our brains that are doing the work doesn't mean we can control them. The fact that we're here at all is a mystery. God is perpetually engaged in the act of creation.

I believe everyday events are sacramental. It isn't just the bread we eat on Sunday or the ashes on Ash Wednesday. The world is full of objects that are signs: Like signposts that point to meaning beyond themselves.

I remember with sitting with a senior chemistry major in my office at the University of Delaware, where I teach. He gestured at a very big tree on the mall; it's not solid he told me. It's made of rapidly moving atoms. In the end,

poetry and chemistry may come down to the same thing—the mystery that lies at the center of our existence. It makes you believe there's got to be a creator, doesn't it?

1. **5. Are you a believer? Is your faith something that informs your life? How so? But mostly, tell readers how your faith informs your poetry, especially the more devotional work like that you sent me for consideration as part of the Addendum to this interview-article? The interest basics of this series of interviews are also directed at how you as a poet view God, and I assume as a Christian, how you see Christ acting in your life in your art? By this I mean, not only Christ's presence, but influence of the Gospels and importantly your life in its devotion and worship? Your personable response is welcomed.**

Yes. I'm a believer. And I am a member of **St. Peter's Episcopal** in Philadelphia. It's a church which is 250 years old, with a graveyard around it, so those of us who walk into the church every Sunday have some contact with "the great cloud of witnesses" who came before us. It is a wonderful place to sit and reflect. With a group of about 50 people at St. Peter's I'm reading the Bible in 90 days this summer. I've read it

Her official picture as Professor at University of Delaware

many times, but it's wonderful to go through it again. We're in Leviticus now, and moving towards the great history books.

I think of poetry as particularly ... well, let me see ... in America we love what we can hold onto:. A new blazer, keys to a house, and especially money. Poetry is inherently about a world that isn't certain in that way. It isn't literal. Poetry is at its heart, metaphor. Jesus taught in metaphor. He called himself the "bread of life", for instance. You say, how can that be? How can a guy walking around with his friends in Galilee be bread? Well, poetry uses metaphor, exactly like the metaphor of Jesus' bread.

I would say good poetry always reveals the world of what we can't see and touch. It's the spiritual world that lies in us and around us, that patiently woos us all our lives, and tries to get us to pay attention. Most of us, I think, feel a deep longing for something. We don't know what. It isn't going to be satisfied by a new blazer, or a lifetime achievement award. That kind of longing [for the spiritual world] is in itself hopeful. I think it's planted in us as a

sign-post, an arrow, pointing us to what we need. Wasn't it Augustine who said, "Our hearts are restless until we come to rest in You?"

Poetry...good poetry...always talks about that world. The world that's not literal. I don't think it delivers dogma or theology. It's not about doctrine. Explaining doctrine is the job of priests and pastors and theologians. Poetry bears witness to the way of seeing that's not literal and not dogmatic. Since Americans tend to be so literal and materialistic, poetry is fairly radical in this culture.

- 1. 6. In a recent interview with poet Luci Shaw, you said, "I think finally writing poetry is an act of prayer, or certainly an act of faith." Let's talk about faith again. In our era, in this American nation, it seems faith is in short supply. Is it the poet's job to tell us something about faith and Christian hope, too? Speak to us about the poet's job: in its various dimensions, as you've known it.**

The poet's job is to be aware of that other spiritual world. And to be able to talk about it in terms of images our bodies experience—smells, sounds, sights. It's a matter of making the spiritual world

plausible to the reader. In order to do that a writer has to hone her craft by writing and reading.

There are many craft issues. But perhaps the three most important areas, the big craft issues, are how to write metaphor, how to use rhythm, and how to pick up music in the lines you write. There are exercises that can make a writer better at all of these. To become more aware of the “music” in the language, for example there are ear training exercises. In addition to exercises, when a poet is reading in the tradition, it’s important to notice how the great poets have managed metaphor and rhythm and music in their work.

More recently, I’ve come to believe that part of the job of a poet is to argue for poetry in the public square. This goes back to something we were talking about earlier. Poetry by its very nature argues against the speed of the culture, argues that we need quiet, we need reflection. Human beings need poetry to help us think deeply about what matters. In America we need poetry because we have such an infatuation with surfaces. Poetry argues for deeper thinking, for quiet and reflection to think beyond the surface.

As a poet, I do a lot of things other than sitting and composing poetry. But when I’m at home, I do go to work. I sit down in a chair in my office early in the morning and work the same way anybody else does, all day. What do I do? I write craft lectures for my classes, do interviews, draft talks and lectures, and answer letters and emails from readers. Today I’m writing cover copy for the first books of two fine young poets who were my students. I’ve just finished writing a 300 page book of prose, which has taken over a year. I revise poetry, email editors, and get ready to run writing workshops. Sometimes I’m on the road; I travel to speak around the country and do readings. (Email Jeanne here: jwalker@udel.edu).

Being a poet is a job like any other job in the sense that you do it whether you're excited about it on any given day or not. You've made a commitment. If you don't make a commitment, if you don't fulfill the promise you've made to actually do the work, you find yourself thinking a lot about writing, but not writing.

1. **7. Your Vita is so long and detailed, it tells of a healthy and productive life in literature, a strong interest in other poets, and many, many years as a teacher at the University of Delaware. To my surprise, you translate Romanian poetry. What about it interests you? Tell us something of this unusual, at least to my ears, work: How it informs your own poetry, both the work of a poet and the poetry, as well as living a life of faith?**

One of Jeanne Walker's poetry books. This published by University of Illinois Press, who will soon publish an E-book of the work.

I'm not really a translator. At the request of a Romanian poet, I traveled with [the poet] **Luci Shaw** to Cluj about five years ago to meet with about 20 or 30 young poets who gathered there from all over Romania.

First Luci and I flew to Vienna, then drove through Hungary to western Romania. That was a harrowing trip. We passed through three country's border controls. We were nervous because we had in our suitcases 200 disposable syringes for one of the poets who required a daily injection for hepatitis. I also brought along 20 pairs of jeans. People all over the world love jeans and they're expensive in Romania.

Luci and I absolutely fell in love with those poets. We wanted to make their work available in English. We asked the translators who had worked with us at the conference to give us rough translations of

their poems.

When we got home, Luci and I sat down at my dining room table and argued out the translations together. We both enjoyed it enormously. Most of those poems have been published over here. In its international issue, *Image* magazine brought out a poem by [lonatan Piroasca](#), for example, who was the head of the conference. This is part of lonatan's poem:

On the expecting sidewalk

the garland of the cross is growing

you pick it up and slowly

it becomes all that you have

and you don't understand

how come so suddenly

the sky has cleared.

That explains why I've translated from Romanian, even though I'm not, actually, a translator.

1. **8. In the event I've left something out, or missed something, or you want to add some words, please do.**

I can't think of anything more. But thank you for this interview, Peter. It's been a pleasure talking.

ADDENDUM

PORTRAIT OF THE VIRGIN WHO SAID NO TO GABRIEL

This is the one Giotto never painted.

She looked up from baking that morning, hearing
his feathers settle and his voice scatter like gold coins
on the floor. He told her, his forehead sweaty
from the long trip. *Me?* she breathed, *Oh sure!*

But after he walked away, she couldn't forget his look,
the strange way his feet rang like horseshoes on the stones.
What she'd been wanting before he interrupted
was not the Bach Magnificat, I can tell you, not stained
glass. Nothing risky. Just to keep her good name.

Small as she was, how could she keep in her heart
those centuries of praise? But I praise her,
anyway, for wanting a decent wedding
with napkins folded like hats and a good Italian wine.
I praise her name, Lenora. I praise the way

she would practice carefully, making the L

like a little porch, where she could imagine standing

to throw a red ball to some children she loved.

I praise the way, year by year, she let herself see

who that visitor was. Think of her collecting

belief slowly, the way a bird builds her nest

in an olive tree. Then finally how one year,

after the leaves fell, she was an old woman

looking at the truth, outlined against

the salmon sky, knowing it was true.

For not despising her own caution then, I praise her.

For never feeling envy. And for the way, once,

she stepped past her fear to hand a cup of water

to a thirsty carpenter fainting by her door.

In every room of this gallery I think I see her picture.

-for Henry William Griffin

Wheaton Magazine

A Deed to the Light

STAYING POWER

*In appreciation of Maxim Gorky at the International
Convention of Atheists. 1929*

Like Gorky, I sometimes follow my doubts
outside and question the metal sky,
longing to have the fight settled, thinking
I can't go on like this, and finally I say

all right, it is improbable, all right, there
is no God. And then as if I'm focusing
a magnifying glass on dry leaves, God blazes up.
It's the attention, maybe, to what isn't

there that makes the notion flare like
a forest fire until I have to spend the afternoon
dragging the hose to put it out. Even
on an ordinary day when a friend calls,

tells me they've found melanoma,
complains that the hospital is cold, I say God.
God, I say as my heart turns inside out.
Pick up any language by the scruff of its neck,

wipe its face, set it down on the lawn,
and I bet it will toddle right into the godfire
again, which—though they say it doesn't
exist—can send you straight to the burn unit.

Oh, we have only so many words to think with.

Say God's not fire, say anything, say God's
a phone, maybe. You know you didn't order a phone,
but there it is. It rings. You don't know who it could be.

You don't want to talk, so you pull out
the plug. It rings. You smash it with a hammer
till it bleeds springs and coils and clobbered up
metal bits. It rings again. You pick it up

and a voice you love whispers hello.

—Originally published in Poetry

JESUS AND THE CABBAGE

His friend Martha's making soup, because you still

have to eat. Meanwhile, back in the Garden

cave, the same Garden where he prayed to let

this cup pass from him, He comes to Himself lying

on a stone shelf in the cool dark, all 200 pounds

of Him, only changed. Minus mass, maybe,

or impervious to gravity. He doesn't understand this

as a physics problem. He lifts his hand and stares

at it. In town Martha's trying to keep her tears out

of the soup. The cabbage offers her its tough pale green

handles to steady her wobble. She strips its layers

down to the heart, while Jesus—whoo-ee! His astonished face,

chisel it in marble!—lasers through the swaddling

grave clothes. Heaven's volatile physics draws him up.

In the deepest dark of winter when I hold a cabbage,

peel off its outer leaves, before I plunge the knife in,

I think when I take that kind of journey,

I might light my path with this green moon.

Sojourners

GESTURE UPWARDS

I have promised to pray for a friend
the way one promises when there are no solutions.
Here in Vermont the cold is slowing things down—
the way a squad car parked along the shoulder
slows traffic. The birches are migrating
to precincts of yellow. From there
they'll take their permanent leave.
I pull into a lane to study how they do it.
Beside the road a cat stretches, pouring herself
towards her paws. Birds scatter, fanning out
as if flung into the sky, as if someone
wants to demonstrate the physics of motion,
nothing about bones and muscles, just a flawless
gesture upward. The leaves float down so slowly
it feels as if my car is sinking under water.
I am a fish, watching the sea turn
gold. Like the sole of a foot, a yellow leaf
steps on the windshield, then another,

and another, like feet, walking on water.

Anglican Theological Review

New Tracks, Night Falling

BERGMAN

I am at the movies, practicing the discipline
of the sane, taking the characters
to my heart, while reminding myself
they're not me. Red scarf flying against snow
like a flag of happiness. Their looks meeting
across a table in the café. That blessing of first love,
to have your gaze returned. Then later,
the misunderstanding, that bewildering
shift. His face looming big as a baseball field,
his eyebrows flying like hysterical seagulls.
He has just begun to shout when the film gets stuck,

the same ugly word, ugly word he can't call back,

a word she can't forgive. In the booth

a kid bends over the projector,

a god now, performing small maneuvers of love

as we stare at the palpitating hooaha

of the man's mouth, the cruelty in her eyes,

watching how habit can harden the heart, how

it's possible to cross into a country beyond choice,

beyond remorse, beyond forgiveness,

how even Pharoah didn't know exactly when,

between the first and tenth plagues,

he found himself inside the answer he could never

change, the way we are stuck in the film's repeating

stutter. Until the boy cuts it. We go home early.

I turn the key in the lock, hearing the wind in the trees,

the sound of God weeping, His heart shattered on

the stubborn mystery of the human will.

Image

New Tracks, Night Falling

ADAM'S CHOICE

It must have been a windy night like this
the trees swaying and hissing,
tossing their hair in desperate gestures,

when he broke out of the spell
and realized it wasn't fair.
He never chose her.

When he woke up, she stood before him
like a bright goblet filling up with water.
He was thirsty. How splendid

it can be to drink when you're thirsty,

was what he thought. He was that young.

Now he realizes there is a stain

spreading on his heart, that the name

she gave the Yak chafes him

and she sings off key. He never chose

her. He'd like to grab his knife

and cut off her song

but rain is slanting down

and she is running toward him, her eyes terrified

under the bending, cracking maples

and a curtain pulls back in him

and he takes her into his arms

and begins the long journey toward

learning to love what he's been given.

New Tracks, Night Falling

SILENT NIGHT

—for Marjorie Maddox

The holly bush stands by the peeling door
she stumbled through last night, under the stare
of curious eyes. She didn't make it far

beyond the first stall, so she lay down there
to let her body have its way with her.

Rubbing her back, he braced himself against the door.

Maybe she wished that she could give it up—
the greeting of the angel on her stoop,
her yes, the thousand future paintings. She would swap

it all to stop this lava. Not to erupt

with God. To halt the bleeding of the Infinite

into that barn. Peaceful? Silent? It was abrupt,

loud, violent. She was blown apart. Body went

one way, she went another. Just to keep her blunt

place in the world, she sent her eyes hunting

the holly: that woman, sister, aunt, waiting

patiently outside to help. As God came ripping

through—a wild train—her eyes kept holding

that tree. She rests now. Wind is leaking

into the barn, the animals are sleeping.

Outside, the holy holly bough is breaking.

The Crux

New Tracks, Night Falling

LITTLE BLESSING FOR MY FLOATER

-After George Herbert

This tiny ruin in my eye, small
flaw in the fabric, little speck
of blood in the egg, deep chip
in the windshield, north star,
pole star, floater that doesn't
float, spot where my hand is not,
little piton nailing every rock
I see, no matter if that image
turns to sand, or sand to sea,
I embrace you, piece of absence
that reminds me what I will be—
all dark some day unless God
rescues me, oh speck
that might still teach me how to see.

Poetry

Ruah

New Tracks, Night Falling

PRAYING FOR RAIN IN SANTA FE

—for Don Murdoch

This is the end of the world, slow motion, this burning,
burning till earth is parched, the cypress crisping,
cactus brown, brown grass, brown horizon.

Through the Cathedral hands of the faithful pass a candle.

Feel the pull of prayer in the hot dark.

Tell God nothing can live without water,

water, which is 70% of what you're praying with,
rivers longing through you for more water.

That's when it comes to you:

in prayer lies prayer's answer. In the calling out,
the visitation. In the arrow lives the target's eye.

So water rises from its knees, believing water

will come. When rain starts, a fat drop

joined by her sisters, the sound of dripping like

a shy nun sneezing, your heart stops with pleasure

and you pick up the cantaloupe you'll have for dinner

to shake it. The promise inside: flesh

the color of sunset, the slosh of a whole ocean.

Commonweal

New Tracks, Night Falling

FOREKNOWLEDGE

I think he planned it, sort of, from the start,
whether he knew they'd choose the fruit or not.
He scattered hints around the garden, what to do
in case they got themselves kicked out. A shirt
of fur around the lamb. The stream converting
water into syllables. Bamboo pipes.
The caps of mushrooms round as wheels.
Bluebirds composing tunes. He knew nothing
they started later would be new. Except he
didn't factor in the thorns, how they would smart
as Adam—leaving—drove one through his foot.
How clever Romans would invent a crown.
He didn't figure weeds could break His heart.

New Tracks, Night Falling

BELL

– *Good Friday, 2004*

Since time flies one way like an arrow,
the sugar can't be stirred out of your oatmeal,
and no matter how long the murderer sobs
on the median strip—*sorry!*—she can't reverse
her swerve, cannot rescind her drink

before the crash. Was Jesus heartsick
to find history's not a zipper running both ways?
He who loved eternity—its roominess,
its reversibility—did he have to learn
as he grew up that he never could unsay a thing,

once said? And yet today, like all Good Fridays,
He hangs on the cross again. On altars
he hangs. On necklaces. His death is like an x
that rides the wheel of time, showing up again
in ritual, that miniature eternity, that spring

re-sprung. Dear God, there in your big eternity,
remember that your hands and feet can never
be unscarred again. Hear these words spoken
by a body that suffers, by a tongue
that will stiffen and be gone.

Have mercy on us who love time.
May this prayer be a tire that rolls
over every inch of whatever way
to find You. May it be a bell
which can never be unrung.

New Tracks, Night Falling

THANKS

—After Gerard Manley Hopkins

for September sun like a sharp thread
that strings and pulls me
down the footpath, nearly blind, toward
the dark woods, for the hawk kiting

on high sheen above the field
as I cross the footbridge.

For the water's slather, for bittersweet,
stoneflowers, slagmire, silt, sediment

rushing into the slurp of gravity. Thanks even
for seek and cover, for the seam that
opens in the hay, mouse tail splitting the gold,
ears sleeked back, frozen against

the plummet, wings folding silent
as umbrellas, bill hooked, steel
cables grabbing, hauling up. Thanks
for fierce, fast, for finality,

for let-go, limp, at last. Thanks for not
covering up what I can't grasp,
and for sunlight holding earth
to heaven, still as strong as harp strings.

Crux

New Tracks, Night Falling

CONNECTIONS

After against, among, around. How I admire
prepositions, small as they are, nothing
but safety pins, their lives given to
connecting. They are paid help,
maids in black uniforms who pass
hors d'oeuvres. Or better, they're the joy
that leaps between us when we get to
know them. Without connection, what
can survive? Because the lawn

waits for the sun to wake it from
its winter nap, we say sunlight
lies *on* the grass. Even the simplest jar
connects—jar under moonlight, on
counter, jar in water. It was prepositions
in the Valley of Dry Bones that stitched
the femur to the heel, the heel to the foot bone.
And afterwards, they got up to dance.
Between, beside, within may yet keep
the chins and breasts from tumbling off
Picasso's women. If I could, I would
make prepositions the stars of grammar
like the star which traveled the navy sky
that night sweet Jesus lay in his cradle,
pulling the wise and devious kings
toward Bethlehem, and us behind them,
trekking from the rim of history toward Him.

Christian Century

Books and Culture

New Tracks, Night Falling

HELPING THE MORNING

After the graveside, after the ride home, after

a winter of drought, the chain

and padlock on my heart,

morning shows up at my bedside,

almost too late, like a big sister

holding a glass of water

and I drink, glancing through the window

at the tiny red barn flung

into the lap of the brown valley below.

I am amazed at the silent, terrible wonder

of my health. I am giddy at the lack of war.

I want to help the morning.

I pray the bedpost, the windowpanes.

I put our children on two doorknobs,

Our sick friends in mirrors.

Like the aperture of a camera, the morning opens

and keeps opening until the room is filled

with rosy light and I could believe

anything: that grass might turn green again,

that cloud the size of my hand

might swell, might drift in, bringing rain.

Christian Century

New Tracks, Night Falling

LOOKING FOR RUBY EARRINGS ON PORTOBELLO ROAD

Not to want it *all* is a sort of defect—

the porcelain cows, socks made from flags,

scarves fluttering against the blue throat of the sky,

hot dogs, broaches made of forks, paper cockatoos,

an organ grinder with three blind cats,

a lover wrapped around a saxophone.

Listen as he coaxes it to love him.

The perfect earring, if I could find it, will tumble

through a sidewalk grate soon enough,

and yet I drift across the street, waiting

to be gulled, trying to catch fire again.

Then the notes of the full-throated sax

rise, and my eyes rise with them

to stones gleaming on black velvet

in a stall cluttered with celestial junk

and I laugh as the saxophone is laughing,

because the stone is the least of it—

cheap glass or plastic—just an instrument

to play on. And the holy river of desire

runs wide. I buy the earrings,

which call me to the world we can never keep

but must, nevertheless, adore,

it being all we know of eternity

Interview: Al Staggs, poet of dissent speaks of his work and life

by Peter Menkin



Megan Tan Al Staggs performs “A View From the Underside: The Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer” for the Hall of Philosophy audience The Chautauquan Daily, Chautauqua, New York

This is another in the ongoing series of interviews with American poets. The Reverend Al Staggs was kind enough to talk more than two and a half hours by phone on three separate occasions in the month of June, 2011. This writer called him at his home in New Mexico USA from his own home office north of San Francisco in Marin County’s Mill Valley. These admirable and seemingly complete conversations covered a variety of topics related to the poet of dissent who was ordained many years ago in the Southern Baptist Church, but after a transforming experience that involved formative work at Harvard University Divinity School, Al Staggs decided he must leave his 24 year career as a parish minister. He began offering and giving performances, a one-man show of courageous historic figures who were known in their time and afterward as either world renown or American renown Christian figures. Some would say, world renown figures.

He has performed these works as a writer of the one man performances, and as a poet of dissent (anti-war poet), The Reverend Al Staggs, who is married with grown children, still holds his ordination. He says this about his relationship today with the Southern Baptist Church. (Though this writer tried to confirm his ordination, he was told by a national figure of that Church that ordinations are bestowed by each individual Church.)

The polity of the SBC is such that you will not likely receive a response from the national body. Baptist churches are fiercely autonomous, one of the hallmarks of Baptist life and identity. I was ordained in 1976 at the First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Texas. Every Baptist church, historically, has the authority to ordain ministers. Ordination is really not the business of the national body as would be the case in other denominations. It is very unlikely that any church would take the trouble of reversing an ordination.

This email is one of those received on the subject of Al Staggs ordination, etc. In another earlier one he writes:

Yes, I am still an ordained Baptist minister and I was ordained by a Southern Baptist church, however, the landscape of Baptist life has changed radically in the last thirty years. My ordination continues to be valid among all Baptists, however, I have taken the prerogative of no longer identifying myself as a "Southern Baptist" minister. I call myself simply a Baptist minister which is more inclusive with reference to non-Southern Baptist Baptists.

In yet another recent email he writes:

I would, however, clarify the fact that I am no longer a Southern Baptist. I remain a Baptist but not one who is in any way officially connected to the Southern Baptist Convention. I have more affinity to those Baptist groups who have left the SBC such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists as well as the American Baptist Convention. The CBF and Alliance are both an outgrowth of the split in the SBC. I hope that this makes sense. Southern Baptists are markedly different from what they were when I first began my service as a minister with that denomination.

On his website, he says:

A few years later he took the step of leaving the pastoral ministry and began a career as a full-time performing artist, adding characterizations of Clarence Jordan, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Thomas Merton and Walter Rauschenbusch to his repertoire of programs. He finds great satisfaction in bringing these notable figures to life and sharing their relevant messages with audiences throughout the world.

THE INTERVIEW

1.1. Since your work is a work that I've called, Poetry of Dissent, and because you are an anti-war poet, I want to distinguish between the polemical work you do as a writer and your work as poet and artist. This is a blurred line, certainly, though your new book, "What Would Bonhoeffer Say?" is more polemic than not. It is a work published by Parson's Porch Books of Tennessee that helps tell your audience and readers about your oral presentation performance as one man show, so popular in Churches and other spots. Walter Brueggemann says of the book, whose profits go to feed the hungry and the poor, "This is a terrific piece you have done. You invite your audience into big and deep stuff, and it will no doubt be supportive of your oral presentation." Tell us how your poetry differs from your performance work as a one man actor in a show and the polemical view of the dissenter and anti-war man of conscience? Has it informed, your poetry, by something special in your life, for you tell me it is a result of studies at Harvard University with Harvey Cox and Henry Nouwen?

The way in which the poetry is distinguishable from the plays is that the poetry more directly states my convictions regarding moral and ethical issues. The plays are more indirect. In that venue I am portraying Dietrich Bonhoeffer or one of the other characters (Clarence Jordan, Oscar Romero, Walter Rauschenbusch, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr., Roger Williams, and William Sloane Coffin). The characters are speaking for their own time and context. The poetry is much more personal as I employ that genre to speak to current issues involving peace and justice concerns.

So much of what I do as a poet and as a performing artist is influenced by Latin American liberation theology. Liberation theology has several different streams—the Black, the feminist, the South African—and there's even a Jewish liberation theology. The central thesis—the basis—is that, according to scripture, God has a preferential option for the poor and oppressed. Matthew 25: 31-46 is the central text and it was also used by Bonhoeffer long before the advent

of liberation theology: “As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me. I was sick and you visited me; I was hungry and you gave me food; I was naked and you clothed me.” That’s a condensed version. At the end of the pericope Jesus makes it clear that the manner in which we treat the downtrodden is the same way we’re treating him. “Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.”



One man performance as Bonhoeffer by Al Staggs

I was a Merrill Fellow at Harvard Divinity School and Harvey Cox was my academic advisor [1983]. I took two Latin American Liberation Theology courses with him, and they were the two pivotal courses for me. One was a seminar and one was a class. I wrote a paper titled “A Liberation Theology for North America,” which was the paper that provided a kind of ownership of what I was learning and applying to my own context as a pastor.

That year of study was life-changing, career-changing. I had decided to pursue a vocation as a senior pastor, and my courses at Harvard completely redirected my faith journey. They deepened my faith to more of a concern for social justice and gave me the confidence to jettison a lot of former convictions I had as a conservative Baptist Minister.

It is hard to demarcate—it is conscience informed by faith. A few years prior to the year at Harvard, I began to realize that the issues of applied theology had been ignored in my earlier training as a minister. I started writing poetry at that time. I believed that it is important for a person of faith to give witness to that faith by raising one's voice to spread the word, to get the news out. That was an essential part of my training as a Christian and a pastor. After a year at Harvard, I still saw that as an important agenda but an agenda with a different twist. That was when I began to see my work as more inclusive than merely the Baptist Church.

One could say that I have abandoned being an evangelist. On the other hand, one could say that I am a “redefined” evangelist. One of my primary concerns, and the preeminent force behind my writing, is to educate, stimulate, and hopefully edify the Christian community as a whole.

The symbol of the Cross is central to everything I believe regarding faith and its application to our time.

THE CROSS

The Cross

Simple

Crude

Ugly

Ghastly

Applied to common criminals; a punishment of humiliation,

of excruciating agony, of death; a tragic symbol of the

crime of all time, the crucifixion of the Son of God; epitome

of banishment, relegated to its place outside the gates. The Cross,

atop stately

structures

of advanced

civilizations.

Now within

the city gates.

Worn by the

inhabitants

in gold, in

silver, with

diamonds.

Adorning

magnificent

edifices,

established

in society's

mainstream.

Massive

Shining

Artistic

Esthetic

Accepted

Co-opted

Excerpts from Staggs' performance of Bonhoeffer presented in July 2011, upstate New York, USA as reported in The Chautauquan Daily, Chautauqua, New York:

“For the church is really only the church as she exists for others, and it is for that reason I will tell you with great deal of sincerity and conviction: I think the church should sell all of her property and give it to the poor. I am almost disgusted with worship services and liturgies and grand choirs and great music and splendid sermons in the face of the injustice which prevails in our land, for to conduct liturgies and to do worship in the face of this structural evil is blasphemy. And then there are most of the ministers who seem more concerned for their own security, their own station in life, than they do about the plight of the oppressed in our land.”

■ “There was another person that year who was to have an even greater impact upon me, and it was the person of Frank Fischer. ... I came to the most radical and profound revelation, I do believe, of my entire life. ... For the first time in my privileged existence ... I began to look at

life and history and the interpretation of Scripture ... from the perspective of the outcast ... of all those who suffer.”

■“Hitler promised us security, and oh, how we worshiped at the god of security, while we allowed the systemic and structural evil of genocide to eat away at our souls like a cancer. And do you think that God is going to hold us guiltless? You see, Christians in Germany face a terrible, terrible dilemma ... We either work for the victory of our nation and thereby the destruction of civilization, or we work for the defeat of our very own nation and hopefully preserve civilization.”

■“I have learned the secret of being able to transcend whatever size cell they put me (in). And what is the secret, hmm? It’s remembering — just remembering the experience God has allowed me in my life.”

From the review in the same newspaper daily@ciweb.org: “The audience hung on to Staggs’ every word; patrons leaned forward in their seats and chuckled at occasional moments of wry humor, peppering Staggs with questions once his performance ended.”

Emily Perper
Staff Writer

2. Let's delve more into the anti-war statement of your poetry, a stance I find unusual as you are still a Baptist minister in the Southern Baptist Church. (See introduction to interview.) I say unusual, for this is a conservative group and not well known for opposing war as dissenting Americans. Your poem, "Talkin' 'Bout Jesus," starts: My goodness, there's lots of folks/ talkin' 'bout Jesus – what would Jesus do, / What he said in the Good Book. / But there's not much talkin' 'bout what Jesus would say/ or what he would do when it comes/ to the burning issues of our day. / Naw, that's too much of a risk... This is from your book, "A Pilgrim in Rome: Cries of Dissent," published by Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America in North Carolina. In what way does this work speak of courage, and what is this courage that you speak of to you? Do you try to emulate it, or have you expressed your definition and dramatic sense of this kind of courage in history through your various performance work as artist? Tell us something of your recent two stop tour, and how your poems and your portrayal of Bonhoeffer elicit your thoughts and those of your audience on this matter.

First of all, I need to correct the misconception that I am still a Southern Baptist minister. I have not been a minister in the Southern Baptist Church since 1989.

All of the individuals that I portray exhibited great courage by their steadfastness in the face of obstacles that ran the gamut from severe criticism to outright danger. A noted quote from Bonhoeffer's writings is "When God calls a person, he bids that person to come and die." As you know, Bonhoeffer was executed by the Gestapo in 1945. The performing is a part of my attempt to give witness to issues that need to be talked about today—to stimulate both churches and other audiences to begin thinking about the courageous words and deeds of these individuals and their relevance to today's economic and political climate. I wrote the presentations with the specific intent of provoking people to consider current issues as they relate to peace and justice concerns.

Jesus discussed the importance of giving witness, the importance of bringing in the Kingdom of God. I believe people of faith must have the courage to (1) acknowledge that there is something wrong with the economic and political structure of our world today—the status quo—and (2) endeavor to create an environment that would establish the Kingdom of God here on earth, thereby eradicating injustice and bringing about true peace as opposed to the constant proclivity to war. I concede that there is an aspect of idealism in the term “bringing in the Kingdom of God,” I would also confess to a great deal of impatience with the status quo!



Publicity photo of the anti war poet

grew up in a Southern culture in which the concept of spirituality was traditionally limited to personal piety. But my education and life's journey have convinced me that when Christians speak of spirituality, there should be a political and economic dimension to that spirituality. One should not consider spirituality as merely personal and relate it only to one's individual piety.

In regard to the difference between traditional spirituality and that which adds the political and economic dimension, I refer to two texts: (1) William Stringfellow's book titled "The Politics of Spirituality" and Obery M. Hendricks, Jr.'s book titled "The Politics of Jesus." As I recall, Stringfellow was Episcopalian. I think Hendricks is a Baptist; he grew up Baptist. He is an African-American professor at New York Theological Seminary.

The term "social gospel" has been attributed to Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918). He believed that the gospel has social implications as well as personal ones and that the dimensions of the social gospel had been neglected historically. To emphasize his point, he gravitated toward this key phrase in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In other words, his understanding of that prayer led him to preach that Jesus' intent was the inauguration of the Kingdom of heaven on earth.

That concept automatically has radical and revolutionary implications, in any time! So attempting to live life and help shape the world as if the Kingdom of heaven is here on earth puts a follower of Christ in conflict with the status quo.

Much of my poetry is a cry of protest against the status quo. From "The Children of Lazarus": Those that suffer here should not/ be required to wait until the hereafter/ for the alleviation of their suffering. / And those who possess an abundance/ should either share and work for equity, / or else not look forward/ to anything after this life, except/ that which awaits us all, / judgment. [The last section of p.27, "A Pilgrim in Rome."] That is the agenda that I see—all of those who name the name of Christ are called to follow, push, speak out, become advocates for the oppressed.

3. I found your poem, “Family Values,” spoke of the poor with concern in a rhetorical fashion that in this writer’s immediate reaction speaks mostly to a fundamentalist or conservative and Baptist kind of audience—as you conceive it. The poem ends: ...Think about Mary and Joseph/ trying to find a place to start in the land/ where being poor and transient/ means certain robbery, / not by the criminals in the street/ but by squeaky-clean “good” people/ who have made greed a family value/ and injustice the price of success. In this kind of prophetic statement, and your work has a hallmark of the prophet warning the people and readers and nation America, you assume so many Church people are “squeaky-clean” and that they do not believe they are sinners. Will you explain what you mean by this group you cite, and who they are in the world of organized religion? Will you tell us something of the role of the prophet in the world, even as prophetic poet, and if you fill this role? Has anyone said so?

It might appear that the poem is simply referring to wealthy Christians and/or fundamentalist Christians. But on the second look, one should recognize that this poem is also about structural and systemic evil, which then goes deeper to the matter of the status quo. The economic structure of [American] society is weighted in favor of a minority of its citizens. That would be the tax structures, wages, benefits—that is where one encounters the structural evil. Though it is more benign and also legal, it is nonetheless morally evil.

I would cite such sources as John Shelby Spong and Walter Brueggemann, who provided endorsements for “A Pilgrim in Rome,” and Bill Moyers:

Walter Brueggemann writes, “Al Staggs knows about words and puts them to fresh and suggestive use. He knows about brutality that shows its ugly face in too many places. And he knows about phoniness that supports evil by its default. With his words he conducts guerilla

warfare, leaving us unsettled, seeing more clearly than we might wish, inviting us to decide anew. No easy slumbers here!”

John Shelby Spong writes, “Al Staggs writes his poetry with the passion of a prophet. Like Amos of old, he recognizes that divine worship is nothing but human justice being offered to God and that human justice is nothing but divine worship being acted out. His words call religious spokespersons and political leaders who lace their rhetoric with religious phrases alike to acknowledge both their idolatry and their hypocrisy. Read him and weep for what your country has become and for what Christianity is no more.”

Bill Moyers writes, “I read ‘A Pilgrim in Rome’ with great reward. Some of your insights- ‘the death of a conscience’, ‘those who are being crucified this very day’-are stunning. You are a truth-teller, and I greatly admire you.”

4. When I was in Church the Second Sunday of Pentecost, I thought about your work as prophet both in your performance of historic characters in a one man show, but mostly as poet. The reading we had was this, and I’d like you to comment on the risks of prophecy as poet in a personal way, and as it is in the lives of the historic figures you portray. The quote from the Bible: (Jeremiah 28:5-9) The prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD; and the prophet Jeremiah said, “Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.”

The risk of prophecy is that a person who speaks in that medium will not be popular with a large number of readers. One does not write in this genre to sell books or to be invited to speak at a large number of conferences. The prophetic opinion is at the outset a minority opinion. It is not one that is rendered to solicit a large following.

In Jeremiah the prophet is predicting a coming judgment if the people of God do not change their ways. The prophet says that all forms of religiosity come to nothing if worship is not accompanied by works of justice. Therefore, the prophets would go so far as to say, and Jesus would go so far as to say, that worship without pursuit of justice is blasphemy.

This quote comes from Bonhoeffer's classic work, *Cost of Discipleship*: "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church. We are fighting today for costly grace. Cheap grace is grace sold on the marketplace like cheap merchandise—grace without price, grace without cost. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the Cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate." Written in the 1930s, that is a benchmark work and is probably his most famous book. In it he derides any understanding of the Christian life as one of mere profession of faith.

5. Readers may want to know more about your relationship with Harvey Cox while you were a student at Harvard Divinity School, when you held a Charles E. Merrill Fellowship with major emphasis in Applied Theology under his direction. Talk to us about this experience that for you was so life changing as an ordained minister in your Church (Southern Baptist), and as a man.

To my surprise, Harvey was a Baptist (American Baptist). He had an uncanny ability to pique the interest of his students. He was also able to merge his great knowledge of scriptures with a view towards applying those truths to politics, economics, and sociology. His field was Applied Theology. I earned my Master of Theology degree in Applied Theology.

Harvey has the ability to analyze the reality in which we live theologically, economically, and politically. He was a very eclectic teacher. So our study of scripture and theology always contained commentaries on the world's art, economics, political science, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. One has to understand that Harvey was teaching a class on Latin American Liberation Theology. That would be a controversial subject to most people. I can say for certain that it would not be taught in most American seminaries. Liberation theology was, and still is, considered to be slanted toward communism or, at the very least, socialism. To teach that class took courage.

6. What made you leave your work of serving as a pastor for 24 years and taking on the work of a full-time performing artist? This writer finds this kind of transformation and even the formation of change both significant and fascinating to your work in the world.

You have to understand I started preaching at the age of six. Just kidding. I found myself to be restless as a pastor, with a desire to say more about my convictions. In the Baptist Church the policy is such that a minister can be summarily fired for very inconsequential reasons. [Losing your job.] That polity has a tendency to make ministers beholden to the congregation and therefore reluctant to speak to their true convictions.

I had already developed my gift for performing since I had been performing as a comedian since high school. I perform more than 50 comedic interpretations. They are comedians, politicians and actors, such as Robin Williams, Red Foxx, Red Skelton, Paul Lynde, Jonathan Winters, Bill Clinton, the two George Bushes, etc. The idea of portraying people of courage in recent history occurred to me and became more interesting the more I thought about it. It turned out to be a fairly easy transition from comedy to the more serious, dramatic portrayals.

I cannot cite any one playwright who singularly influenced my work. I had watched Hal Holbrook's portrayal of Mark Twain and thought he did a good job of bringing Mark Twain to life, so that was probably the most inspiring work for me performance-wise. I performed in Bertholt Brecht's "The Three Penny Opera" in college (I was Mac the Knife) and that theatrical experience influenced me greatly in later life.

7. What lines or works from your poetry, and from your performance work come to mind when you reflect on that you've been writing and publishing works related to the themes of peace and justice throughout your career as pastor and performer and poet? Speak a little about your reasons for these choices in a manner that illuminates their prophetic voice, and what our readers can do to better understand the prophetic voice.

The voice that I have found is one that I feel is more of a dissenting voice protesting the status quo and Christianity's comfort with the status quo. It's a call for the church in general to speak and act as an advocate for those who are disenfranchised. The poem "Legitimation" is a good example of what I mean by the prophetic. In this poem there is a picture of 'comfortable' Christians who are doing their good duties, obeying the laws, adhering to their religion. But they are living in the context of structural injustice that disenfranchises far too many people. There is a paradox there. I utilize paradoxes a great deal in my poetry.

I was greatly influenced by Ernesto Cardenal, a Nicaraguan poet and priest who also served as minister of culture under the Sandinista regime. He occupied a conspicuous place in a fairly socialistic and Marxist government. His most famous work is "Zero Hour," published by New Directions of New York City. Another of his books is "Apocalypse and other Poems" by the same publisher. Cardenal depicted the life of the poor and the oppressed and wrote about the conditions of pre-revolutionary Nicaragua under Somoza's long and brutal regime, which the United States supported through occupations of Marines during the last one hundred years.

From an email from Al Staggs regarding an excerpt from a poem by Cardenal:

Dear Peter:



The poet Al Staggs

The attached is part of one of Cardenal's poems. I failed to mention that James Russell Lowell's work has also been greatly influential to my writing. Here is the first stanza of his noted Once to Every Man and Nation:

*Once to every man and nation,
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with false-hood,
For the good or evil side;*

*Some great cause, some great decision,
Offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever,
'Twixt that darkness and that light.*

Cardenal's poetry was both lyrical and prophetic. It has a certain beauty because he describes the beauty of the Nicaraguan landscape—of its people and land and the plight of the poor. He was born in 1925 and studied in New York with Ezra Pound. In 2005 he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature. He won the Peace Abbey Courage Award in 1990.

[The Reverend Al Stagg's poem:]

LEGITIMATION

No one fired a shot

or committed an evil deed.

No hateful words were spoken.

People were still

kind-spirited, generous,

taking care of their families,

civic duties, work.

They remained religious.

From kind, generous, responsible,

religious citizens

can come the most insidious evil-

the evil of silence,

of pretending to know little,

of supporting injustice

with their votes.

No right of theirs was taken,

no job of theirs was lost,

no child of theirs went hungry.

Their health care was secure.

Their taxes covered by

exemptions, deductions,

their wealth was secured.

Sitting in their holy, hallowed

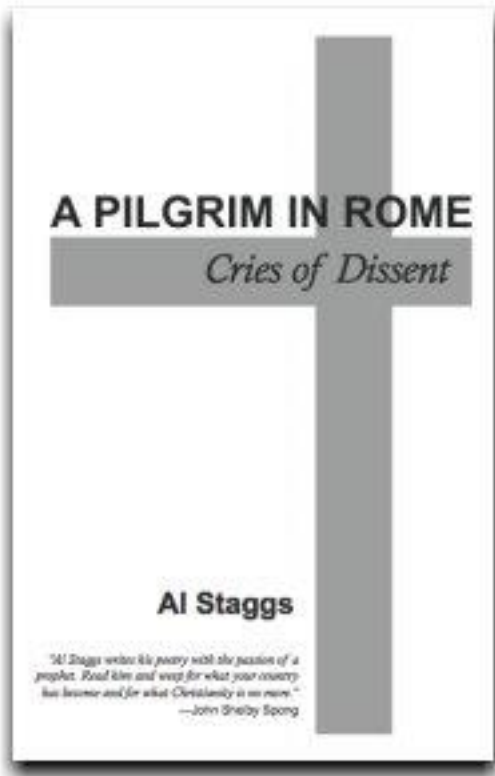
halls of worship,

hiding from the horrors

of destitution,

sustained by their

passive, sinful silence.



8. Young people who are interested in poetry will find your special and even unique, courageous viewpoints in poetry of value in their own studies and efforts. Speak to us some in a way that helps instruct young people in their earlier years, even in their early college years, on how they may develop a more prophetic voice in their own poetry.

As mentioned in the introduction of this interview, Al Staggs and this writer spoke by phone over three separate days, about an hour each time. Al sent an email to me after the second hour of interview, and this is what he wanted to add:]

Dear Peter:

I'm delighted that these two pieces can be of assistance. Tomorrow, as we deal with question eight, I'm thinking of talking about the necessity of finding one's own voice. You can use what I'm speaking about from this email.

It is very important to find one's own voice and one's own style. In discovering one's particular style, one will seek out persons whose style is inspirational and worthy of emulation. The poets who influenced me were Langston Hughes and Ernesto Cardenal. I admired and enjoyed Hughes' use of images and Cardenal's use of paradoxes. For me, writing poetry is an attempt to capture my deepest emotions and feelings as well as my passions which include anger and sentiments.

Poetry should be evocative. In this medium one is not attempting to explain but to move the reader. I call it soul to soul communication.

Peter, I hope this will provide some helpful thoughts as you begin putting the finishing touches on our interviews.

Sincerely,

For me, poetry must be evocative. For me, it avoids explaining too much. I call it soul-to-soul communication.

It is also important to get in touch with one's feelings, as we used to say in clinical pastoral education. Writing poetry is very much connected to one's deepest emotions—anger, joy—not just what one thinks, but also what one feels. It is both an intellectual exercise and an emotional exercise. One needs to explore how one feels about things. I discovered that concept during my year of clinical education, 1976-77. Prior to that time I had found it difficult to acknowledge my feelings and emotions.

9. Thank you for our time together in this interview. Please take a moment to think if I have missed asking you anything, and add a comment or statement of your choice and making, if you like.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in your Poets' Series, Peter. I greatly enjoyed visiting with you.

ADDENDUM I

PRAYER FOR COURAGE AND INSIGHT

Lord, release us from our self-imposed prisons

of limited vision-

limited faith.

Open the doors of our tiny, damp cells

and flood our lives with your light and warmth.

Free us from the need to remain in the narrow

confines of our small physical, emotional and spiritual space.

Give me courage to leave the security

of my familiar habits and petty concerns and anxieties

to walk into the frightening, challenging corridors of the future.

Lord, we are so afraid of today and tomorrow.

It is much easier for us to rehearse the past

and thus repeat it in all its familiarity.

Unlock the shackles of our minds and hearts

and help us to see the possibility of a life of challenge,

service, compassion, love and self-sacrifice.

Help us, Lord, to not hold back because of fear or uncertainty.

Liberate us, O God, to daily fight the urge to accept

our self-imposed sentence as life's victims.

Save us, O God, from the urge to create an image of you

and your will from the false misguided views

that we harbor in our imperfect knowledge of you.

Speak to us, trouble us, save us from the slavish tendency

to remain in bondage to those fears that keep us from trusting you

and the purpose you have for all your daughters and sons.

Our prayer and our desire is to experience your life,

love and joy this day and every day of our lives.

REFLECTIONS ON AN EMPTY TOMB

The Easters pass

and the stories of empty tombs

and a risen Savior are told with fervor

from a million pulpits

but the tragedy of the Cross remains

for God's creation travails under the

strain of her humanity-

for if Jesus is found among

the beggars, the prisoners,

the orphaned, the hungry,

the homeless, the abused,

the penniless, the overworked,

then Christ still suffers on the Cross.

There can be no complete Resurrection

until we are all resurrected-

until we are all liberated.

Just as there can be no freedom

for any person until it is real for every person.

How cheaply we do celebrate the Easter story

with each passing year

while mouths go unfed and while

abusers keep on abusing their victims.

How dare we experience the ecstasy

of our sublime liturgies

while hell continues to rail on God's helpless children.

What in Hell is going on?

What in Heaven is going on?

History is still unfolding and still ringing in our ears-

I wait, I hope, I hurt and I hope.

TIME'S WORTH

And Time was given to me

like a treasure,

wrapped in thousands of tiny packages.

Only when their number dwindled

did I realize their true worth.

Time had been graciously given to me-

and I only regret I had not

given myself more fully in return.

PAYING MIND

It does become discomfoting to know,

to become aware

that the ways things are,

the reality we live,

are not as a result of our own creation.

The reality of our lives

is based upon economics.

Our theology, our philosophy are predicated

upon the principle of buying and selling.

We live for a time as children,

innocent of the pull of avarice

and all that will be demanded of us

when we come of age to get ahead.

So from the time we take leave of home

until we return home following retirement,

we work, we toil to make ends meet.

The idol, the god we serve is the currency

that gives us a roof over our heads,

the means of transportation

and a lifestyle of comfort for ourselves

and our families.

In this reality we are defined

by how much we're "worth",

that is, to say, how much we own

in goods and dollars.

It is, in the final analysis,

the Economy which dictates our lives

and our sense of Reality.

PRAYER FOR THE CHILDREN

(In honor of the legacy of Walter Rauschenbusch)

Dear Creator,

we acknowledge in this moment

that we are all your children,

without regard to creed,

race, nationality or faith orientation.

And we also acknowledge

your special concern for the

impoverished, the oppressed,

the hungry, the infirmed

children, both here in our nation

and the millions throughout the earth.

Our prayer is for the ability

to see all the wounded children

of this earth,

with eyes of compassion,

just as Jesus saw them,

to literally 'suffer with'

those who are victimized

by the forces of structural evil.

We confess our own complicity,

our complacency, our apathy

with a world that produces

so great a disparity as now exists

between those of us

who are privileged

and those whose lives are

constantly in peril

for lack of their days' manna.

We ask forgiveness

because we realize our profession

and our beliefs

are not always matched by practice,

the practice of justice,

the practice of peace.

We ask for courage

to do the deeds,

to take the steps

that will truly make the world

a community

where we put aside

the idols of power,

the idols of empire,

the idols of militarism,

the idols of world supremacy,

the idols of greed.

And as we pray,

we also acknowledge

your abundant Grace that is

offered to all of your children.

May our lives be lived as an

expression of our gratitude

of that unconditional love

as we love unconditionally

all the children of the world.

BIRTH OF A KINGDOM?

If only I could remember

what the birth of that child,

the baby Jesus,

born two thousand years ago,

really means to me, to all of us

who annually commemorate his birth.

That child was born

in the context of poverty –

a refugee, an immigrant.

Marked for a most radical

mission to challenge the powers

of both religion and state,

that child would subsequently be

victimized by both.

His mother provided a glimpse of his

radical purpose by uttering that the rich

shall be brought low and the poor lifted up.

And what could that mean today

in this nation of the super-rich

with the vast number of impoverished?

I'm caring less for all of the traditional

trappings of the season of Christmas,

and I yearn to catch sight of something more

to be associated with the birth of Jesus.

I'd prefer to think of the Christmas season

as a new promise of the coming of the Kingdom of God

on earth as it is in heaven.

The baby was and still is the promise of a new order,

not just a symbol of a religious or cultural celebration.

A new order is needed – an order that confronts

our own powers of religion and state.

The baby Jesus is a reminder that Kingdom Work

is ongoing, unfinished and waiting,

in our own time, to find fulfillment.

ADDENDUM II

A work in progress of recent making by the writer Al Staggs

Dear Peter:

I'm sending a piece I wrote for my Martin Luther King, Jr. presentation. The performance is called Awakening the Dream. I wrote this with the idea of King's spirit returning to our time and making observations about our present context. I have received very positive responses for this work. It is unique because the way the way the speech is designed; it is confronting our present reality.

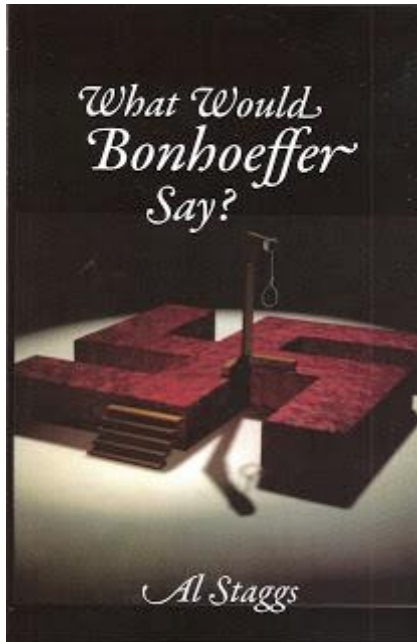
Sincerely,

Al

The next time you go to church and sit in the pew, take a good long look at the cross at the front of your sanctuary. It will remind you that Jesus took sides, he took our side politically. That cross says loud and clear that our lord does not align himself with nations who oppress their citizens.

In the last thirty or so years I've observed, to my horror, vast numbers of pastors and

church members sanctioning one political party as the party of moral values. I do not stand here today to endorse any political party, but rather to emphasize the necessity for Christians to stand for all moral values, and particularly the principle of justice.



We need once again to hear the prophets chide, scold and warn the people of God, that all of our religiosity is empty and blasphemous if justice does not prevail.

We who call ourselves Christians, especially American Christians, have some serious soul-searching to do. I'm convinced that we Christians are disproportionately accountable to God for our unjust behavior, much more so than atheists, agnostics or people from other religious orientations. We need to be reminded of what our Lord said at the conclusion of his Sermon on the Mount when he said:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my father who is in heaven. 22Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ 23Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers!’

We need to remember that the God we praise each Sunday has indeed, as the Liberationists and the great martyr, Archbishop Oscar Romero remind us that God does most certainly have a preferential option for the poor and oppressed.

Piosity without peacemaking is meaningless.

Promoting family values without pursuing justice for all is hypocrisy.

Orthodoxy without orthopraxis is dead – it is faith without works.

Worship without working for justice is tantamount to blasphemy.

To pray to God, to speak of God, to sing to God and not get out and change the world for God is to use God’s name in vain.

To be a witness does not just mean talking to someone about Jesus, it means giving witness to one's faith in the social, political and economic spheres of our own time.

ADDENDUM III

Excerpt from The Reverend Al Staggs preface to his book, "What Would Bonhoeffer Say?" A statement on formation and transition. Note that poet and performer Al Staggs did not lose faith, or his faith. He grew in a new way, in transformation.

I am a white male who grew up in segregated Arkansas and received a master's degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. For twenty years I was a minister in various Southern Baptist churches. Therefore, the second question I am most frequently asked is how a person with my background became interested in the issues of peace and justice in general and in Dietrich Bonhoeffer in particular.

My introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer came rather late in my educational and theological journey; in the spring of 1983 I had the privilege of continuing my theological education at Harvard Divinity School under the auspices of the Charles R. Merrill Fellowship. As a Fellow of Harvard I had the opportunity to attend any classes of my choice within the Harvard system, with the exception of those offered by the medical school. In addition, Merrill Fellows were given the option of choosing their theological advisor among the distinguished faculty of the School of Divinity.

During the year prior to my fellowship, I had read articles and books concerning the advent of a new theological system called "Latin American Liberation Theology." A course by this title was offered in the spring semester at Harvard Divinity School under the direction of the Divinity School's most noted professor, Harvey Cox. Professor Cox, whom I would choose to serve as my advisor, was skillful in helping his students understand the basis of Liberation thought. It was through a combination of reading the remarkable texts on the Theology of Liberation, Cox's scintillating lectures, and my own interaction with this world-renowned professor that I began to take a new look at my Southern Baptist legacy, my identity as a white male growing up in the South. I also began to reconsider my presuppositions about what the Bible was saying to me and to my world.

The Bible, which had become so familiar to me as a result of years of Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, and seminary training, suddenly began to take on a radical new meaning for me.

The prophets from the Hebrew Bible had been there all along announcing God's impatience with systems and cultures of injustice. As I reviewed the Gospels, I was shocked at the radical teachings that had been completely ignored or glossed over in my own religious education. Why had I never before heard Matthew 25:31-46? I could not recall ever hearing a single sermon based upon this powerful and important text. Wasn't this a pivotal concept in the teaching of Jesus as to his level of identification with the poor and oppressed of the world?

I then took a new look at the Gospel of Luke and saw for the first time the preponderance of teachings regarding the rich and the poor. Where had all of this been hiding during all of my years as a Baptist and a student at a Baptist college and seminary? The Bible was suddenly a radical, even revolutionary text that seemed threatening to the status quo with which I was so well acquainted. Even in the familiar Magnificat in Luke there was a sense of the revolutionary in the advent of the Kingdom of God. Suddenly, with the help of Liberation Theologians, I was beginning to see the biblical account of the birth of Jesus and Mary's announcement in an entirely different manner.

Sometime during the spring of 1983, a light was turned on for me and a whole new understanding of my southern Bible Belt culture, with its religious conservatism, was revealed to me. I had always assumed that I was especially favored in God's sight as I was white, male, American, and a "saved" Baptist. What I had assumed was that I possessed the truth of God's Word in my life since I had always given assent to the absolute truthfulness and reliability of the scriptures. After my exposure to Liberation Theology and the teaching and guidance of Harvey Cox, it dawned on me that there was a new way of looking at both the world and the scriptures. What I began to feel during that spring was that there was a need within me to undergo still another kind of conversion. What I needed was to see who I was in relation to other groups and classes of people and to learn to listen to other kinds of people in order to help change the systems of injustice that have existed for generations.

Studying the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer helped me to see and understand that a person who has historically represented a privileged and oppressive class could do something that is liberating for other people, for those who are oppressed. Here was a theological giant, notable among church leaders throughout the world and thoroughly ensconced in a culture of privilege and academia, who sacrificed those privileges in order to speak and act on behalf of those who were not as fortunate. Dietrich Bonhoeffer became an example to me of how one might be able to live

out the challenges posed by the theologians and church leaders of Latin American Liberation Theology. I had been discovering new truths in my reading of the Liberationists but had been unable to discover how I might apply these new truths. Bonheoffer became my guide.

...

It is rather strange that what I have discovered about myself in the last several years is that I am still a conservative Baptist from Arkansas whom at a very early age felt a call to ministry and mission. That early conviction is still within me. What has changed is that there is now a different expression of that conviction. The focus and beliefs of this new conviction would be viewed in the eyes of many as being “liberal” in nature. There is a statement attributed to the late T.B. Maston, a longtime distinguished professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, which is pertinent at this point. Maston said, “be conservative in your interpretation of scripture and be liberal in your application.”

In my characterization of Clarence Jordan, I interpret his written views as follows: “I’m convinced that Jesus was a raging liberal. Yes, he was a raging, sold-out, thoroughgoing liberal ‘Cause you don’t get put on no cross for being a conservative!” These are my sentiments exactly. I am a liberal who is conservative in my view of scripture.

This interview-article appeared originally Church of England Newspaper, London.

Interview: Robert A. Siegel, Messianic Jew and beginning poet of Redding, CA USA

Interview: Messianic Jew and faith poet, Robert A. Siegel is just starting out in poetry

by Peter Menkin

In an effort to find out what is on the mind and in the work of a beginning poet, in this case Robert Siegel of Redding, California, this writer interviewed a Messianic Jewish believer who lives in Northern California USA. Redding, California is north of San Francisco by 230 miles. Gateway community Christian Church of the Nazarene is important to Mr. Siegel, and is located near Redding.

Mr. Siegel attends Messianic Jewish services, and is a friend of a local Nazarene Church in the area. An Evangelical Church, Nazarene Church has about 2 million members in the United States and almost 60 seminaries or schools.

Robert Siegel, beginning poet of Redding, California USA

The pastor of the Church Mr. Siegel attends was ordained by the national church, like all their pastors. Pastor Bob Rupert started the Messianic group in Redding. He is with Nazarene Church.

The worship service for Messianic Jewish members is more like a Jewish Temple, Mr. Siegel tells this writer.

It is out of this tradition, this Nazarene Church and its adjunct worship church of Messianic Jews where Mr. Siegel's poetry springs. He says, "Hosea, then John — as they have similar themes (God's love)..." are favorite books of the Bible for him. Much of his poetry expresses these feelings of affection.

This interview-article is part of the series of ongoing interviews with Christian and Anglican poets. I came across Mr. Siegel's work through an error, thinking him the same Robert Siegel who wrote the recent poetry book, "a Pentecost of finches." There will be an article-interview with the established and well-known Robert A. Siegel. The "real" Robert A. Siegel is an Episcopalian.

The Messianic Mr. Siegel tells me about his poetry, "I have shared them with a close circle of friends around the years." Some of his work is in the Addendum to the interview in this article. Regarding his education, he graduated with high honors in Pastoral Leadership from a Bible College and was a missionary in Europe. The Bible Colleges Mr. Siegel attended, were, he says in an email, "...after Bible college, I attended the Maryland Bible College & Seminary in Lenox. Actually, Stevens School of the Bible, which I attended was in Lenox, Massachusetts." He has been writing poetry since 2002

Preaching INTERVIEW

- 1. Many readers have thought about being poets, starting out with the work. This is especially true of those who read poetry. I would think this would be the majority of them, themselves, try their hand at the work. As a poet who is starting out as a writer, where did you get your inspiration to begin? Can you tell us something**

**about trying out your first works of poetry, and what you did after reading it later?
Have you an example of a couple of lines of that very beginning work you can share.**

I am not sure where (or when) my inspiration began to write poetry. The process paralleled the start of a novel, which I began in March of 2001. It was about a month after signing divorce papers. The purpose of my creative writing journey was to express feelings and experiences from God during the process of recovery, by projecting them into various characters in other times and places.

- 1. 2. You've said how interested you are in the Bible, and as a Messianic Jew who is friend of your Nazarene Church in Redding, California, talk to us a little of what in the Bible you've found most poetic. By this I mean, what has stuck in your mind or in your heart. How does it speak to you in its poetic way? Maybe a best way to get to this is to have you quote something from that part here.**

Psalm 119 is the best example of Biblical poetry, in my mind. It is an acrostic poem, that is, each section begins with a letter in the Hebrew language. A person who knows basic Hebrew can identify many of the key words in the opening line of each section. There are four other psalms written in this style, as the Book of Lamentations. This use of poetry in the Bible is obscured in English translations, but the *Jewish Publication Society* version makes it clearer by citing the Hebrew letter which begins specific lines or sections.

Tom Meyer, a scholar of Biblical memory-practices, explains (2010) that the reason why ancient Hebrews wrote acrostic poetry was so it could be an mnemonic device; the poem/psalm would be easier to remember, and therefore, to recite. It also takes planning and forethought to craft a poem alphabetically. And, of course, "men of God wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit," as the New Testament declares. Some of these men, however, were trained how to craft religious poems.

- 1. 3. What is it about the Nazarene Church that has caught your ear? Tell us something of their Methodist style worship; that is the sounds and what goes on in a worship service. I assume the worship of the Messianic Jew is more like that of a Jewish Temple, by what you tell me. Will you tell us something of these words that you find poetic and catch your attention. Which of your poems most reflects this worship in the Messianic Jew tradition?**

First, let me clarify that I identify myself as a Messianic Jew who has friends at a local Nazarene church who are exploring Messianic-style worship and teaching. I have only attended three of their Sunday services so I cannot comment much about their "sounds." They are, however, not Pentecostal.

Both the Sunday services and twice-monthly Messianic celebrations on Friday nights feature Messianic style music. A couple of years ago, the latter services featured traditional liturgy from Judaism but we have moved away from that, seeking more heart-felt ways to worship.

A poem of mine that best reflects worship in the Messianic style – and perhaps closer to Temple-era praise – is “The Seer’s Psalm.” It expresses the narrator’s personal relationship with God in Old Testament terms. The poem is written in the style of a psalm, using many of the techniques used by David. The poem alludes to Queen Esther, and the prophets Elijah and Ezekiel.

1. **4. Of the classes in poetry you’ve taken, the two, and especially of the two, the one about the Bible and the Old Testament, tell us something of the teacher and what he emphasized. I notice in the works you sent for use at the Addendum to this interview, that most have Old Testament themes. When you are teaching Bible, which of the stories (Chapters), are the ones you emphasize? Do you read any of your poetry at these Bible teaching sessions, or have you thought of doing so? What brought you to become a Bible teacher in your community. What about your students do you like most?**

I took two poetry classes in recent years. The first class was taught by Dr. Jefferson Carter at *Pima Community College* in Tucson, AZ. It was *Introduction to Poetry*; we read and wrote many styles of the art. Jefferson particularly liked my astronomy-related poems, stating that they contained unexpected concepts and vocabulary, quite unlike poetry by other writers. He encouraged me to be innovative, take chances, and to read my work to other students in the class. One thing he taught me was “the narrator is not the poet,” that is, the narrator of a poem could be anyone or anything. I regularly remind non-initiates to poetry of this maxim, as they often have stereotypical views of the genre.

Speaking against poetry-stereotypes, Jefferson also taught that poetry is often not romantic, nor is it Romantic in the historical sense. This understanding gave me the freedom to write about unconventional themes. He also taught that poems always have a meaning; there may be several nuances or interpretations to metaphors, but essentially a poem is about something specific. Both sides of this principle encouraged me to write on multiple levels. In my word choice and syntax, I am often aware of multiple shades of meaning which I leave to the Reader/Hearer to discover. Sometimes I find out years later that a symbol may have *yet another meaning*, wholly unknown to me when I wrote the poem. The additional nuance permits the Reader/Hearer to become a co-creator of a poem’s meaning – something not fostered in clear prose. Jefferson taught me this idea which still intrigues me.

This week, I discovered that Jefferson has recently been nominated for a Pushcart award in poetry.

The second class I took was taught by Dr. Ed Wright at the *University of Arizona* in Tucson. His

course on Biblical Poetry was part of the Judaic studies program, which was my minor. We used J.P. Fokkelman's book on the same subject (2001). It was technical, translated from the German and difficult to understand at times, but a worthy guide to explore the technical aspects of Scriptural poetry. Ed taught that the psalm-writers did not dream up poems while staring at clouds in fields with their sheep. They wrote according to patterns and models of styles that had been well established in Ancient Israel – and surprisingly, throughout the Near East. In "The Seer's Psalm," I incorporate many of these stylistic elements, such as parallelism.

You asked what Bible stories and themes do I often use when teaching. I have taught a lot about the binding of Isaac from Genesis 22, and the love of God as revealed through Hosea's commitment to Gomer, his unfaithful wife. Neither themes have been employed in my poems, however, they are folded into my unfinished novel.

You asked if I read my poems at Bible teaching sessions, or have thought about doing so. I know from experience that Christians in the Eastern bloc countries regularly read their own poems of praise during services – or used to, in the 1980s, when I visited there. But I have only attempted to read my works, on two different occasions. I used them as illustrations, but they did not seem to be well-received. Perhaps if I wrote a piece that was more specific to a theme, omitting unusual allusions, they would be better received. Upon reflection, I will pursue this further.

What brought me to become a Bible teacher in my community? Within a year of becoming a Believer in Messiah Yeshua (Jesus), I sensed a call to serve Him, and went to Bible college. After graduating with High Honors, I served in various ways. Currently, I teach the Scriptures from a Messianic perspective – based on my knowledge of Jewish culture and history. Having some understanding of Hebrew enhances the teaching very much. This training, knowledge and skill has made me a specialist of sorts. I do not feel, however, that I have fully used this teaching gift as much I desire. But I'm not done yet in serving the Living God!

- 1. 5. Given the opportunity to talk to poets like yourself who are starting out, what encouragement would you offer? Where do you suggest they look, especially young people in high school or college years. Speak something of your own experience when making this encouragement.**

I would encourage students, especially at the college level, to seek encouragement and resources from local poetry centers. Both the *University of Arizona* and *San Francisco State University* (I attended both) have Poetry Centers. The latter has a taped collection of well-known speakers who have shared their poetry at the school. SFSU also regularly hosts guest poets. I once heard a speaker talk about Medieval Spanish-Jewish poetry – a fascinating subject!

I would also suggest to aspiring poets to take opportunities to attend writing workshops – on any correlative subject – and to read their works to attendees. One thing that I have not done –

but have considered – is reading my poems regularly in open-mic venues. And I am planning to join a local Writer’s Forum.

1. 6. Is there anything you’d like to add that I’ve missed, or that you just plain want to say as we come to the end of this interview?

Thanks for asking me to share my experiences and perspective in writing spiritual poetry. I feel I have a lot to offer but have not fully pursued opportunities to expand my influence for the Lord through writing. Your questions has fostered reflection about why and what to write. May the Lord be glorified as we practice this craft!

ADDENDUM

BITTER TEARS OF AFFLICTION

by Robert A. Siegel

A poem for Passover.

These are the bitter tears of affliction

Reminding us “we were slaves

Once in the Land of Egypt,

But the Lord delivered us with

An outstretched hand, and

A mighty arm.”

We are still slaves in a

Land of Exile. Wanderers

Without a home.

When can I go Home

To Haifa, and Mount Carmel –

And teach there, as I was destined,

With or without my Queen?

These are the bitter *years* of

Affliction and Exile.

“Yet the Lord delivered us with

An outstretched hand, and

A mighty arm.”

A SEER’S PSALM

by Robert A. Siegel

To You, O God, I lift my voice

To *El* Who dwells on high,

I plead to you with my whole heart,

I cry to You with tears and sighs.

When will You deliver me from this affliction

That I may come before You with joy?

When will You free me from this confusion

That I may worship with Your People?

O Adonai, the Circle of Time overwhelms me:
The old despised me when I was young
And the young refuse now to break bread.
When can I come to destiny
And teach with my Queen by the sea?
Who is this Queen of Glory
Who leads by wisdom with me?
Guided by Your signs and dreams
I have searched into the Past,
I have peered into the Seven Mirrors
But her image is dim in the brass.
You steer the Wheel within the Wheel
That I might know what I cannot know;
You hold eternity in Your hands
That humanity may serve you.
My Present's filled with emptiness,
The invisible few clearly see;
Like a ghost from the nether world,
Friends disavow knowing me.
I sought a Deliverer but
Esther chose not; she could not
Save my spirit from the End
Before we could create a Beginning!
Yet You prepare a spring for me
In the Wilderness Your streams are sweet;
You come alongside and strengthen me,
Your presence comforts, *God Who Sees!*
When strangers laugh and women answer me not,
You hold me in Your surrounding arms;
You send Your creature who purrs to me:
The raven feeds Elijah by night.
My God, compassionate Father,
Deliver me from this Whirlpool of Time!
Then will I teach students Your Ways,
And proclaim Your truths to the Nations!
O love the Lord, you called-out ones!
For He is close to the broken-hearted;
He strengthens those who master the Times,
Enabling them to ride the beast!
Praise, I say, the Master of Time.

12 November 2005;

revised 14 November

A LAND WHERE LIGHT
IS THE LANGUAGE

by Robert A. Siegel

Alluding to *Psalms 19*. The poem draws on the double meaning of the Hebrew word, *kol*, first as a noun meaning “voice” and then as an adverb meaning “now.”

Arise, O Muse!

Speak through me, that I may sing your virtues!

Give voice – *kol* – so the “string” thereof

Resounds throughout the earth!

In the Silence are many words

Flummoxed by my own grey matter –

“The voice thereof” extends into the night

While sleepless dreams leave me stupefied!

I have no dreams, but I have Visions –

Unspeakable, and yet they live

Between us, hanging in the ether

Like telegraphic thoughts. It should not

Be this way; yes, it must, for I

Have written the Signs. But I reach

For wind – breath – *pneuma* – *ruach* –

And battle like a Jedi against myself.

Complications set in from old wounds –

But who wants to squawk about that?

I want to talk about E-lectricity

But don’t know where to begin. All –

“*Kol*” – is written. Would you read it?

Parables at Troy’s shores. Rivers

Of tears at Arundel. Decisions

On Mount Carmel. And dragon-slayers –

All committed to ink in a Land

Where Light is the Language,

As if Affection required Translation.

My thoughts are beyond words. *October 25, 2011*

Interview: Poet and Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes of New Hampshire...a conversation with this blogger...

by Peter Menkin

- I notice in going over the interview with United Methodist Minister and poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes that a lot of the theme in these questions, and answers, have to do with a poet's work. It also has to do with, *To whom are you speaking*, and Pastor Steve says in so many words, *It is more about who is speaking with me*.
- (I help people to live with heart, connect with God, and practice gentleness, gratitude, trust, courage and love.)

The poet is a contemplative man, and I think the reader will agree that the Facebook friend whose current Parish is New Hampshire, USA (Bow Mills United Methodist Church) and who will be moving to Massachusetts, USA in July (St. Matthew's United Methodist Church in Acton), has a conversation with God going in his life. This Billings, Montana man who went to Rocky Mountain College, and Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California is married to Beth, and sometimes speaks in terms of aphorisms in his Facebook postings. Here are three of those:

- *People love to ask, "What would Jesus do?" as if they know. But Jesus consistently did what no one expected!*
- [Steve Garnaas-Holmes](#) *Yes! People are not going to come for our programs. They're going to come for deep relationships, for vibrant living, for joy, for love, for transcendence. It's the heart. The heart shared by a whole community who live as if they've just been resurrected. Hearts strangely warm. Unless we're madly in love with God, they should pass us by.*
- *You see? We are one. We weep each other's tears and sing each other's hope. We are one. To be human is to be one with all. We are one.*

We two spoke by phone on a Monday night in April 2011, 8 p.m. New Hampshire USA time: Steve from his home and this writer from his home in Mill Valley, California USA. As a towards-the-last-word of this introduction, a singular hallmark of Pastor Steve's poetry is Christian hope.

Pastor Steve can be emailed at his Parish: pastor@bowmillsumc.com

The interview is the second in a series of interviews with poets who write religious and spiritual poetry. Right now this writer has [Pamela Cranston](#) interested in being interviewed, a California poet who is an Episcopal Priest and former Sister in the Franciscan Order. Also the Washington State USA [Lucy Shaw](#)!! These two begin the section, *Anglican Poets USA*.

Your nominations for poets in the United States to be interviewed are invited. Anglican nominations are good, others of religious and spiritual inclination for nomination are encouraged, of course. Please note their name in the comments section of this posting. State a reason for including them in your list of religious and spiritual poets.

INTERVIEW

As a [poet](#), when did you find you wanted to write poetry and begin to do so? As part of that question, the inevitable, Why do you write poetry? What do you find it has for you and others?

I don't remember when I first began to want to write poetry. I've been doing it as long as I can remember. I can think of lots of reasons why I like to write poetry... but when it comes right down to it, I just love to write poetry.

A lot of the poetry I write is essentially prayer. I think poetry and prayer is the same thing. In that sense I don't really write it for an audience, only for God. In a sense, I am my own audience.

Part of the wonder of poetry is the possibility of conveying that wonder to somebody else. Through the poem someone else might join in the conversation, with a different set of perceptions and questions or insights and experience.

Somehow their contribution to the conversation enriches me in the same way someone else's prayer enriches me, even if I'm not aware of their prayer.

Have you a book of your work, or do you intend to have one published? (If no book in the works, make believe there could be so questions can be answered.)

Will you let us in on this news and tell us What thoughts you've had about a theme, or if there are particular favorite poems of yours that you'd like to see as part of the work? Meanwhile, where is your poetry published, mostly?

I do not have a book. I would love to. A lot of people urge me to publish a book. There are three reasons I haven't. I enjoy writing poetry more than the work of getting a book published. It's a matter of looking at poetry and writing to editors. That kind of thing.

I think I am haunted by a little bit of self-doubt, and I think, "Who would want to look at my poetry?" It kind of tugs at me. The third reason is I just plain don't get around to it.

I've thought about putting together a book with some kind of theme. People have said I could write a book about my walking in the woods, or just about God, or reflecting on Biblical passages. The only place my poetry appears regularly is my blog, [Unfolding Light](#). Rather than compiling a book on one them, I'd prefer one with more variety in it, with a theme that's a little harder to pin down.

Where I first found [your work](#) was in the journal, "Weavings," published by the Methodist Church (Upper Room Publications). How did you get started with that journal of spiritual writing? Please tell us why you like the journal, and as a Methodist Minister and poet who is currently assigned to [Bow Mills United Methodist Church](#) in New Hampshire, What does it offer a parishioner in its writing?

In fact, "[Weavings](#)" is one of the only places I get published right now. ([Weavings](#) is committed to exploring the many ways in which God's life and our lives are woven together in the world.) The way I got started is that the editors asked if I would submit something, and I've been doing it for a little while. One of the things I like about "Weavings" is that they explore the spiritual life through spiritual writings, essays, stories and poems, in ways that are really honest and unflinching, and accessible to the average person—who are in touch with that kind of thing. It is not couched in special language.

Your wife is helpful and encouraging of your poetry work. So I understand. Can you tell us in what ways she helps and supports you? Also, this writer is doing a series of three interviews with Bishop's Wives, the first done. Tell us as a husband, What your wife does also in your Church? Is there a special role she fulfills, or work she does as a Pastor's Wife?

At home with his wife Beth

Actually, Beth doesn't have much to do with my poetry at all. She is my reality check and my anchor in a lot of ways. My poetry is a thing I do on my own. Like she plays the piano and does Spiritual Direction. We have worked together many times, and that is a fruitful partnership there. We really complement each other well. At the moment we are not working together, but she is a great consultant to have on board.

There is always the inevitable and somewhat worn question that is a favorite of people who ask questions of writers and poets. I think it remains a good question, and fair game to ask, Where do your ideas come from? And to expand on the question, What seems to be your theme in the recent poetry you've been writing? If it is liturgical, or Biblical, or some kind of inspirational theme you think your own parishioner's need or want, please give us a little detail or anecdote.

I don't usually write poetry for Parishioners: I write for a wider audience or a different audience. Some of the poetry I write is in the [Church] newsletter. I don't know that there is a theme as much as there is intent. Especially when I write for Church folks, I write with the intent of engaging them in the reality of God in their own lives...to pay attention more deeply. Sometimes that is directed towards scripture; sometimes it is just inviting them to look at their daily lives in a fresh way: inviting them to see more deeply.

Poetry really comes for me out of prayer. It is fair for me to say my poetry comes from God, in the sense that my prayer life comes from God. It's listening. Poetry is 90 percent paying attention, and ten percent taking good notes. All of the work of the writing and crafting of the poem is just ten percent of it. I think it is a matter of listening, listening to God.

It seems you read your work aloud. That's a guess, but should be in the realm of possibility. Where usually do you read? Where may someone find your work on the internet? Or in New Hampshire and elsewhere? Sometimes reading aloud to people or even to oneself help the poet craft his work. Do you revise very often a single work, and are you ever inspired to find an encouragement to change a poem after having read it aloud? This writer does? To share something with you my Facebook friend, a poem can be nine years old and have stayed with me all those years, still to be revised. Is so the same for you?

Do you work from pen and paper, or use the computer or typewriter solely?

Have you a mailing list of friends or associates who you "write for" and who are a kind of help or sounding-board for new poems?

As you know, I like to write poetry to express my own sense of religion and respond to liturgical and inspirational matters, including our Church (Episcopal) prayer book or the Bible. I find I do my writing of poetry first to share with friends, many from Church. Is Church an inspiration or aid to your own sensibilities as a poet in ways every day—other

than the specific writing of the poems? It is for most of us who attend worship, but what of the poet, is there a special inspiration? Even in the words of prayers or readings?

You ask about reading poetry aloud. It's really true. It's their sound, not just the words and their meaning. I enjoy the music of poetry, the actual spoken words. One of the most pleasurable expediences writing a poem I ever had was once, late at night, lying on the floor. Working with the sounds of the words was actually physically pleasurable, like eating bread. There is something of that with what I am doing with poetry, let the sound be the poem and let that be the reality of a poem.

(Here is that Thanksgiving poem):

Thanksgiving

It does not take—although
it could—our breath away,
this warm November day
that should be dense and dark;
instead it gives.
The park is washed: a tide of light
leaves the day's bright spine
exposed, the clear sun beached
upon the evening's shore,
reposed where children each
reflect it, young and pure.
How is this day not old
and grey, but yet a bride,
lap full of wedding gifts,
all tied with gold, with light?
It lifts our hearts, too cold,
and too soon winterized,
to watch our children run
in ribbons through the gold,
the bright gift
wrapping strewn, untidy sheets of light,
across the afternoon,
not innocently laughing
jewels into our laps
until our arms collapse,
and we are warm. How can
this laying on of hands
of light, so late, be right?
What are we to remember
of this gilded not-november
miracle of days?
The oracle of praise

this day of Magi lays
abiding at our feet,
the reason given
for tidings of light,
light piled against the trees and benches,
against our legs and feet,
against our thoughts of sleet:
God has no oughts, but gifts.
This is our tithe: let light
be more than interlude,
life little more than this—
delight and gratitude.

There are some poems that suggest themselves as done, but a lot of poems stay open and I keep working with them. I sometimes work with them years later and see [them] in a new way. There may be a specific problem that I can work with that vexed me. A poem can come off in

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60 minutes or twenty years. There are some poems that never finish: they keep growing and suggesting new things.

I use whatever I've got. I use computers, I use pen and paper. I write poems on the back of envelopes and napkins. I write anywhere. Sometimes I'm sitting in the house, or out walking. If I don't have any paper I have to work it out in my head, like on a bus.

You know it's what we call a first reader... someone we send a work to before we send it out to a public. The closest thing I have for that is my sister who lives in Montana where we grew up together.

Almost anything becomes an inspiration for me. Sometimes my poems have a liturgical feel about them. Sometimes specifically scripture and the church liturgy. But I would say just as often it is a piece of junk mail, or something I overhear. I do believe God speaks to us many places. Poetry comes to me in whatever places I encounter. It comes from all over.

What would you say to young poets?

To young poets, I'd say four things. The first is: pay attention. Look around. Notice stuff. Poetry is mostly listening, and partly taking really good notes. Let what you see be itself, without imposing what you think. Really look. Look with your eyes and your heart; look at what we usually miss. Look at what's invisible. Listen to what people say, and how they say it, and what is unsaid. Feel what's inside you and around you. You don't have to have deep emotion to write poetry, just deep attentiveness.

Secondly: Don't try to be "good." Just be yourself. Don't worry about how good it is, just pay attention to how true it is. Keep practicing this weird thing of matching up words with the world in and around you. It will take a long time until you've practiced enough to bother with that whole thing of judging whether a poem is "good enough," especially for other people. Don't bother. Just write for yourself.

Third. Write a lot. Write a bunch of junk. As long as it's a bunch. Just write. Get it out. Practice writing. Practice paying attention to how you say things, and put your mind to learning—and keep going.

Four: Read a lot of poetry. Lots of different kinds. Not to copy, or to compare, but to whet your appetite, to see new possibilities, to learn from others— and to enjoy! Notice how they do it. Notice what happens in poems that you really like. See what can you learn from them.

Is there anything that you'd like to add, a question of your own or statement you want to make that I have not touched upon?

I don't think so.

ADDENDUM

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O Greening God, Spring be your praise!

Praise be these warming, gentle days,

the evening light that lingers more

each day beside her lover's door,

the silent, ice-bound brook's release

to sing its melody of peace,

and snow-bowed limbs, now free, that lift

their hands to thank you for the gift.

The lines of geese, mile after mile,

are monks processing up the aisle

toward the altar of their nest

while chanting psalms that we are blessed.

Your praise be sap in buds and roots,

the courage of the small green shoots,

the breeze from warmer bosoms drawn,

the songs of birds that thread the dawn.

O God of budding, birthing things,

all rising up your glory sings—

all bugs that hatch, all smells that waft,

all thawing, swelling, turning soft:

this is your praise, and may it be

as in the woods, so clear in me.

Emerge in me, O Lord, like spring,

that I may be the hymn you sing.

The glass of water says

The wind says, “Let me hold you.”

A cloud mouths your name in silent prayer.

A bird intones an ancient chant,

“Beauty shadow you! Beauty shadow you!”.

You walk under the street light,

an angel with one wing,

and she says,

“You, too, have this gift.”

You cross the bridge,

patient on its hands and knees,

and it says, “Walk over my back

to your love.”

You go along the frozen river

and the black water moving underneath

says, “Already something in you

is arriving at God.”

The steps you climb say,

“Yes, the whole world holds you in its lap.”

The door says, “Go through! Go through!”

The wastebasket says, “I will relieve your burden.”

The glass of water, with a twinkle in its eye,

says, “Yes, it’s true. Beforehand,

long ago, we all agreed, all of us,

to bless you, and to go on blessing you.”

Ox

If I were an ox

and You my driver,

would I mind?

If love were my yoke,

would I balk?

If I walked a path

whose way I could not see,

whose end I could not know,

would I complain?

If I pulled a cart laden

with riches beyond my knowing,

bound for strangers,

would I refuse?

Oh, Driver, Brother, You

who set me free,

crack your whip of light.

Let's walk this joyful road.

Autumn Colors

Autumn colors have an edge.

Shards of red and orange sparkle

through the cracks and splintered ends

of summer's gentle arc.

Behind the green and murmuring veil of bliss

death speckles every leaf and bark,

and colors spark and hiss.

Leaves turn the shade of blood,

the shade of bread, then die;

they bleed and wash the trees

with broken colors,

shadows radiant and bright,

'till all is gathered and dispersed,

'till all is white.

Death's season; passion's colors:

these hues are loose,

and not at our command,

but still not unforgiving:

undomesticated shades

only at the edges of our living.

Faith is such a luminous surrender:

the red transfiguration of the tree,

celebrant with unexpected brightness

pouring life, unshackled, to the wind.

Listen at the garden's edge, dear child

of life and death, to this rustling oracle:

that what we call a miracle

is often only wild.

This article appeared originally in Church of England Newspaper, London.